

impulse

KEITH ROBERTS

CORFE GATE



impulse

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Associate Editor: Keith Roberts

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Editorial by Kyril Bonfiglioli

This is not the first time that I have complained on this page about the difficulty—and, to my mind, the futility—of trying to churn out a breezy, newsy (ugh), analytical eight hundred words each month about fiction in general and speculative fiction in particular. I feel that for the time being enough analysis of our kind of fiction has been done and that what we need is some fresh fiction to analyse. I have a rooted dislike for puffing our own wares and no talent for chattiness. Eddy the Happy Editor went out in the 'twenties, along with Orace the Orrid Hoffice-boy. Science-fiction magazines are almost the last survivors of the editor-personality and readers'-letters cult which arose forty years ago: another example of the paradoxical old-fashionedness of science fiction. Well, *IMPULSE* is not particularly modernist in tone—although I see that our most advanced contemporary has recently started a sort of Old Codgers page—but neither is it devoted to science fiction alone. We believe in allowing our writers all the liberty of factual context formerly arrogated by sf writers alone but not binding them with the curiously dated rules which sf writers alone have always patiently shouldered.

This is not the first time, I repeat, that I have made these complaints. It is, however, the last. In future the editorial candle will skulk under its bushel, emerging only to cast a flickering glow on present and future contents and occasionally a choleric flare when the spirit—or my liver—moves me.

But stay; dry your tears. There is better news. Harry Harrison, the gnomic New Yorker, the Svengali of Sweden and, at present, the Sage of Sutton, Surrey, has agreed to write a monthly piece, tentatively called *CRITIQUE*, in which, untrammelled by fear or favour, he will praise the best, trounce the worst, review current science/fantasy/fiction and cope with any reader's letter which strikes a spark in his great soul. Indeed, this very issue contains his first *CRITIQUE*, in which he whirls his great club Castigator about his head to no small purpose. Let it be quite clear that the publishers and I do not necessarily

associate ourselves with anything Mr. Harrison writes. Reserving only the right to change "cracker" to "biscuit" and to expunge four-letter words, we have given him a free hand: no-one who knows him would believe for a moment that he would settle for anything less.

More good news. The same Harry Harrison has finished what I think will prove his *magnum opus*: a long novel about the imminent population explosion seen through New York eyes just thirty-four years from now. It will appear at first in the U.S. this summer and will simultaneously be serialised in *IMPULSE*. (We snatched it, I may say, from the very teeth of a large national daily paper). I hate to puff our wares but this one everybody with a thinking mind *has* to read. I hate, too, to be commercial but every serial we print calls forth scores of letters from people who missed a part, pleading for back numbers. Why not take out a subscription? This does not mean we will not help over back numbers: of course we will. We will also help if you have difficulty with your local bookstall—the change of our name has naturally caused some confusion. Write direct to the publishers for choice: it saves time. The address is on the contents page.

About this issue. Some of the names are famous, some new to *IMPULSE* readers, some just reaching fame. There is surely no need to say anything about BRIAN ALDISS' story except that it is an Aldiss story, which means it is as good as the last but, as always, utterly different. I can think of no writer in any time or field who combines so consistently high a level of quality with such a bewildering number of metamorphoses. You cannot speak of him as "the NON-STOP man" or "the GREYBEARD man"—he is always, only, wholly, the man who wrote *THIS STORY* [HERE]. Two of this issue's writers are following up their *débuts* in these pages with a second story. They are John Rankine and Roger Jones: both men to watch. Newcomers are Messrs. Clough, Redgrove, Parker and Bell, although some of them have already made their names as poets, script-writers and essayists. There are several shorter pieces: it seemed a good idea to group them this time: they are all, I think, of remarkable quality. The longest

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CRITIQUE

by Harry Harrison

I find myself continually torn two ways in regard to the criticism of science fiction. A recent review of a handful of sf books in the TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT pulled me strongly back to the left, away from some reactionary ideas I have been having of late. The review opened with the following statement:

"Science Fiction is at present passing through a trough in its development. Invention is being exhausted, imaginative speculation thin and tired."

The anonymous reviewer goes on to review the books in a fair fashion with a good deal of literary insight. (He also uses a good deal of what might be called TimesLitSup-eeze, a special language used only by the nameless scribes of this journal. I have heard that it is bad form for a writer to quote his reviews, but I assume that this means only good reviews so feel free to quote what I assume is a literary kidney punch. The reviewer said, of BILL, THE GALACTIC HERO, that it was, "... sometimes wildly funny in a very sado-compensatory way." I stay awake nights wondering what that means.) But, in spite of the reviewer's knowledge of his craft, he reveals a painfully inadequate knowledge of the history of this particular discipline. He (she or it, the sex of TimesLitSup reviewers is never made clear) does not know the most obvious facts about sf, and the reasons put forward to explain the dearth of good books are naïve to say the least.

The real reasons for the dearth are that there are very few writers of even adequate sf, and fewer still who can write first class sf. Not too long ago it was impossible to sell an sf book in this country. The situation changed drastically and all the publishers bought books. They bought books written ten, twenty—and even fifty—years ago, and are now scratching hopefully at the lee-soaked wood of the barrel bottom. Now the ancient van Vogts are gone, the Asimovs are being issued one more time, and we shall see

no more masterpieces from Kornbluth or Kuttner. Books are still being written, perhaps more than ever before, but the ratio of outstanding books remains the same as ever, a tiny percentage of the total.

Which brings us back to the problem. What is wrong with sf criticism? It is rather obvious what is wrong with the TimesLitSup; he, she or it has only a rough knowledge of the history of this field. If that. So I am back to square one, forced to admit that to be a qualified sf reviewer a specialized knowledge of sf is essential. And this is contrary to my firmly held belief that the ordinary tools of literary criticism should be used on sf works. If we ask for special treatment we move right back to the sf stone age when if it was sf it *had* to be good. The motto of a fan organization I belonged to in my milk-damp youth was "Boost Science Fiction." It didn't have to be good, it just had to be sf. What few reviews appeared simply howled with joy that the stuff was finally appearing in book form. I have been taking a second look at some of the stories we were enthusiastic about and it is hard to suppress a shudder. I can only explain our complete lack of literary values by the fact we were all about 10 years old. One of the "classics" I have unearthed is a MARTIAN ODYSSEY by Stanley G. Weinbaum. This story is a landmark, just about the first ever to attempt to describe truly unearthly aliens. I can still recall the thrill of pleasure that swept through me when I first read it—at the age of 9. Today, the crude pulp writing and juvenile dialogue make it too painful to finish.

I suppose the only answer to all this is a compromise. The new critic of sf must be possessed of all the critic's skills, and must also have a complete reading and historical knowledge of sf at the same time. This is not asking too much, since the sf author is expected to have as much talent as any other novelist—plus an accurate knowledge and enthusiasm for the facts of science.

Perhaps we ought to lend the critics a helping hand. Here they are trying to write about something that has never been defined. Although this journal is a "... collection of fantasy, science-fiction and strange stories ..." it is still, for better or for worse, labelled as a science fiction magazine. This entire field of literary endeavour is saddled with this name, though only the TimesLitSup is formal enough to

capitalize it. Yet there has never been an acceptable definition to satisfy more than the tiniest minority. Can we do better? In public spirited philanthropy, IMPULSE has offered the prize of a free year's subscription to this magazine for the best definition of the term. Runners-up will receive only the pleasure of seeing their names in print. All definitions to be sent to me in care of this magazine.

Let us hope that there will be a great deal of friction over this attempt at definition, and a great cloud of smoke generated. The sort of screening smoke cloud puffed out by the school of linguistic analysis to conceal the fact that classical philosophy is morbid and almost dead. Not that sf is either of those things, but we are under attack right now from within science itself by Professor Harold Sandon, a zoologist formerly at Khartoum University. Professor Sandon doesn't think much of the chances of there being life of *any* kind on other planets, much less the multifaceted intelligences whom we are so used to. The professor feels that his studies of the evolutionary processes here on Earth indicate only a microscopically small probability that the same sequences of events might be repeated elsewhere. He gives odds of 2^{100} to 1—a million million million million million to one—against there being any intelligent life comparable to ours out there. All of the expensive projects to contact extra-terrestrial life are—he feels—a waste of time and money. Other evolutionary biologists seem to agree with him. G. G. Simpson thinks these theories plainly false, while E. B. Ford calls them "incredibly improbable." And Professor Sandon is a little naughty when he refers to our favourite reading matter as ". . . the current spate of pseudo-science fiction."

Well . . . we've been called names before. Remember the Astronomer Royal who said rockets would never reach the moon?

—HARRY HARRISON

Since IMPULSE started it has run the Pavane series of stories by Keith Roberts. The unprecedented spate of letters from readers has left us in no doubt as to the popularity of the series. This is the fifth and last story—for a while, at least.



PAVANE: CORFE GATE

by Keith Roberts

The column of horsemen trotted briskly, harness jangling, making no attempt to keep to the side of the road. Behind the soldiers the tourist cars of the wealthy bunched and jostled, motors sputtering. From time to time one or other of the drivers essayed a swift overtaking dash that took him past well clear of the horses ; but few cared to risk the manoeuvre, and a bright-coloured jam stretched back over a mile behind the obstruction. The more philosophical of the travellers were already sailing ; the striped lateens billowed in the puffs of breeze, propelling the vehicles along with the smallest assistance from their tiny, inefficient engines.

There was ample need for caution. The pennants carried by the column were known to all ; at its head flew the oriflamme, ancient symbol of the Norman nobility, and flanking it were the Eagles of Pope John, silk-yellow on a blue field. Behind them fluttered the swallow-tailed tricolour

of Henry Lord of Rye and Deal, Captain of the Cinque Ports and the Pope's lieutenant in England. Henry was known through the land as a hard and bitter man ; when he rode armed it boded no good for somebody, and behind him was the authority of Christ's Vicar on Earth and all the power and might of the second Rome.

Henry was a small man, thin-shanked, sallow and sharp featured ; he sat his horse sullenly, muffled in a cloak although the day was warm. If he realized the dislocation he was causing he gave no sign of it. From time to time shivers coursed through his body and he shifted uneasily, trying to find a position that would ease his aching buttocks. En route from Londinium he had lain ten days in Winchester, stomach knotted by the cramps of gastro-enteritis ; and though the fool of a physician, who deserved to lose his ears or worse, had been swift enough to diagnose he'd been unable to bring about a cure. Henry had barely recovered when the clacking of the semaphores had driven him on ; the arm of the fiftieth Pope John was long, his sources of information numerous and varied, his will indomitable. Henry's orders were clear ; to take the confounded fortress that had caused so much trouble, reduce its arms, raise John's standards on its walls and hold it for his liege lord till further notice. As for the West Country filly who'd started all the bother, well . . . Henry grimaced, and stiffened in the saddle. Maybe her backbone stood in need of airing, or she could find herself being dragged to Londinium behind a baggage waggon ; such matters were minor. Minor at least to his own personal discomfort.

The semaphores were working again now to either side of the road, their black arms cracking and flailing. Henry glared at the nearest of the towers, standing gaunt on the crest of a sweep of down. Among the complex of messages it carried would almost certainly be news of his progress ; for days now the information would have been flashing down ahead of him into the West. Another spasm of pain doubled him, and his temper snapped ; he turned his head briefly and a Captain of Horse rode alongside, spurs jingling.

Henry pointed at the tower of his choice. "Captain," he said. "Detach a dozen men. Go to *that*. . . Demand of whom you find there the messages it bears."

The soldier hesitated. The order was seemingly without point; none knew better than Henry that the Guildsmen would not divulge their affairs. "And if they refuse, M'Lord?"

Henry swore. "*Then silence it. . .*"

The officer still stared, until Rye and Deal turned to glare; then he saluted and wheeled his horse. For centuries the Guild of Signallers had enjoyed privileges not even the Popes dared question; now it seemed their immunity was ended, blown away by a diminutive nobleman with bellyache. Orders were shouted, dust rose in a cloud; a group of men turned from the line of march and broke into a gallop across the grass, pennants flying. As they rode the soldiers loosened their falchions in the scabbard, saw to the priming of their muskets. With luck they would come on the Signallers unarmed, if not there would be a short and bloody skirmish. Either way, the end was not in doubt.

Henry, twisting in the saddle, saw the arms of the tower drop to its sides like the arms of a man suddenly tired. He grinned without humour. The respite would be temporary at best; if he knew the Guild, runners would be quickly despatched from the next station in line. After that all men would know of his act. The signal network was a delicate animal; touch one limb and all its parts reacted, sometimes within hours. With good visibility along the Pennine stations his work could be known to the Hebrides by nightfall. And to the Vatican by dawn. . . . He hunched himself, caressing his suffering stomach. Another turn of the head, a snapping of the fingers and Father Angelo jogged up beside him, sweating a little and as usual more than anxious to please.

"Well sirrah," said Henry tartly. "How much longer on this confounded route march of ours?"

The priest bent his head over the map, trying to steady it against the movements of the horse. Churchmen always made lousy riders; and worse mapreaders, in Henry's opinion. The Father's failing sight had already led the party into a bog and forced half a dozen detours. "About twenty miles, M'Lord," he said uncertainly. "But that is by the road. If we left our present way a mile above Wimborne town——"

"Spare me your short cuts," said Henry brutally. "I wish to arrive by Christmastide. Send a couple of your people on ahead and arrange our accommodation some . . ." He squinted at the sun. "Some five miles up the road. And try this time to discover beds not too thick with lice, and just a little softer than the racks of my Serjeant-at-arms." Father Angelo gave a bumbling parody of a military salute and jogged back down the line.

Henry was on the road again early next morning, in a thicker rage than ever. Overnight he had been given proof of the changed temper of the West. As he stood shaving at the open window of his room a crossbow quarrel had passed beneath his elbow, demolishing a set of Venetian case-bottles before burying itself in the far wall. Henry, infuriated by the attack on his person but even more by the loss of so much fine and irreplaceable glass, had ordered an immediate search for the marksman. His soldiers had unearthed a handful of malcontents, all of whom had resisted arrest in a more or less desultory way; they were towed behind the baggage carts till the column came in sight of its objective. Then they were released; they staggered off bemused, snorting blood out on the grass, and none of them made more than a hundred yards before lying down to sleep it off. Henry's ways with rebels had always been noted for their directness.

He rode forward. In front of him the heath stretched out for miles, tawny red, splashed here and there with the fierce parrot-green of bogs. Across the horizon ran a curving line of hills; between them the place he had come to chastise thrust up like an ancient fang. Henry spat thoughtfully. The castle was strong, far too strong to be taken by assault; he could see that already. But then, it would never stand. Not against the Blue.

Behind him the soldiers bunched together; the oriflamme fluttered from its golden staff, tossing in the wind like the fire it represented. Off on the horizon the ubiquitous telegraph waved and gestured against the sky. Henry watched a moment longer then snapped his fingers. "Captain," he said. "Two men to ride ahead to the castle. Let them take orders under my seal to the woman of the place. Have her ready her ordnance to be delivered up to us; and tell her to regard herself and all inside the walls as prisoners of

Pope John. What guns do they have anyway, now we've come so far to fetch them? Refresh my memory."

The captain gabbled, repeating a list learned by rote. "Two sakers throwing three pound ball, powder and wads for them. Some handguns, snaphaunces; not much more than fowling pieces, M'Lord. The greatgun *Growler*, from the King's arsenal; the culverin *Prince of Peace*, transferred on His Majesty's instructions from the garrison of Isca."

Henry sniffed and rubbed the tip of his nose with the back of a glove. "Well, I shall shortly be a prince of peace myself; and I dare say I shall do my share of growling too before the day is through. Have the pieces brought to the main gate, along with what shot and powder they have. Clear a waggon for the arms, and levy mules or horses for the greatguns. See to it, Captain."

The officer saluted and turned back, bellowing for his aides; Henry raised his arm and swept it down in the signal for general advance. At his shout Father Angelo crabbed forward, nearly parting company with his mount in the process. "Quarters in the village, Father," said Rye and Deal wearily. "At the worst we could have a lengthy stay. And secure me this time hot water and a flushing toilet, or I'll send you back to Rome in charge of a crap cart. And you won't be riding it either my friend, I promise you that; you'll be running between the bloody shafts. . . ."

The banners and the eagles spread out, bright in the sunlight, as the column cantered across the heath.

Sir John Faulkner, seneschal of Corfe Gate, woke early from a restless sleep. Sunlight from the fenestella six feet above his head slanted across the little bedchamber, fighting the chill that tended to gather in the room even in the height of summer. The great keep was always cool; for the sun at its hottest could scarcely reach through a dozen feet of Dorset stone. A week earlier the Lady Eleanor, mistress of the place, had moved her people from the lower baileys to make room for the soldiers flocking in and the refugees begging shelter; the household were still unused to the primitive conditions of the *donjon*.

The seneschal rubbed his face, filled a bowl and washed, swilling the water down the sluice beneath the window. He

dressed, grateful for the touch of fresh linen on his body, and left the chamber. Outside, a circular stairway wound up through the thickness of the wall. He climbed it, placing his feet at the sides of the treads; generations of wear had scooped the steps into hollows that were traps for the unwary. At the top of the spiralling way a door, loosely closed by a lanyard, gave access to the roof. He unfastened the becket and stepped through, leaned on the parapet and looked down between the massive crenellations at the surrounding country. Five miles to the south the Channel stretched away in a pearly haze; out there on a clear day keen sight might make out the shape of the Needles, guarding the western tip of the Isle of Wight. The Devil sat there once in the long-ago, hefted a rock at Corfe towers and dropped it short on Studland beach. The seneschal smiled slightly at the fancy and turned away.

Northward were the heights of the Great Plain, pale in the dawn light, grey and vague like the uplands of a kingdom of ghosts. Close to the castle rose the huge swellings of Challow and Knowle, its flanking hills; and all round was the heath, blackened in places by summer fires, flat and sullen and immense, a sour expanse that would grow nothing, supported nothing except roving bands of croppers. He could see the smoke from one of their camps threading up in the distance. Nearer at hand he looked down on the ribbed grey roofs of the village, the farm that stood just beyond the wet ditch. As he watched a lorry coasted to it, offloaded two churns and puffed away round the shoulder of the *motte* toward the Wareham road.

Almost unwillingly, he lifted his eyes to the semaphore tower on the crest of Challow Hill. As if it had been waiting for a cue, the thing began to move; the jerky 'arms up, arms down' of the Attention signal. He knew it would be answering another far across the heath; so far that only the Guildsmen, with their wonderful Zeiss binoculars, could translate accurately the letters and symbols of the message. Way across the land the chain of towers would be moving, lifting their jointed arms, banging them back. *Attention. Attention. . .*

Reading the semaphores was not officially the province of the seneschal; down in the third bailey a scurry of movement told him the guards had already alerted the house-

hold's Signaller-Page. The boy would be hurrying from his room, rubbing his eyes maybe, message pad in hand. The seneschal watched the movements of the arms, lips shaping the numbers as they formed, mind translating the cryptograms to which generations of Signallers had reduced the King's English. *'Eagle Rye one five'* he read, *'North-west ten, closing.'* That would be My Lord of the Cinque Ports, with his hundred and fifty men; he was nearer than the seneschal had thought. *'Nine dead'* said the thing on the hill. *'Nine.'* That was bad; the Pope's lieutenant was evidently determined to enhance his reputation for ruthlessness. There followed a callsign; Sir John heard cables rattle as Eleanor's Signaller worked the arms of his tower. *'Yield your guns'* said the grid repeater briefly. *'Give yourselves into captivity. Messengers en route.'* Then that was all. The arms dropped with a final clash; the tower fell austere silent.

The watching man sighed, and instinctively his hand went to the amulet round his neck. He turned the little disc in his fingers, tracing the outline of the symbol carved on it. Down below the kitchen chimneys smoked, pails clanked as the cows were milked in their stalls. Those of the household who had been in sight of the tower had paused momentarily when its arms started to move, and all would have heard the clatter of their own answer; but no commoners could read the language of the Guild, and they had soon bent to their tasks again. The Signallers knew though, and he knew, and Eleanor would have to be told. He ducked back down the stairway, hunching his shoulders automatically to prevent banging his head on the low ceiling. His mouth was set grimly. This was the thing that had been ordained a thousand years; an era was about to come to an end.

The Lady Eleanor was already up and dressed. A board had been set out for her in one of the small chambers opening off the Great Hall; she was taking breakfast in an alcove beneath a window glazed with coloured quarrel-panes. She rose when she saw her seneschal, and watched his face. He nodded briefly in answer to the unvoiced question. "Yes, My Lady," he said quietly. "He will come today."

She sat back no longer conscious of the food in front

of her. Her face and worried eyes looked very young. "How many men?" she asked finally.

"A hundred and fifty."

She waved a hand, conscious suddenly of her incivility. "Please sit down, Sir John. Will you take wine?"

He leaned back in the window seat, resting his head against the glass. "Not at present, thank you My Lady. . . ." He watched her, and no-one could have told the expression in his eyes. She stared back seeing how the lights stained his hair and cheek with colour, gold and rose and blue. She pulled at her lip, and twined her fingers in her lap. "Sir John," she said, "What am I to do?"

He didn't answer for a time; and when he did speak there was no help in the words. "What your blood dictates, My Lady," he said. "You will follow your breeding, and your heart."

She got up again quickly and walked away from him to where she could see the Great Hall shadowed and forbidding, the gloomy power of the vast crosswall, the dais where in ancient times the family sat at meat, the gallery where minstrels used to play. She touched a switch beside the chamber door; a solitary electric lamp flicked on in the roof, throwing a wan pool of light on the coarse flags of the floor, and suddenly the place seemed fitter for the dead than the living. Somewhere a chain-hoist rumbled; the Signaller-Page ran into the hall, stopped short when he saw his mistress. She took the message he carried, smiling at him, turned back with the flimsy in her hand. She said broodingly "A hundred and fifty men. . . ."

She walked back to her chair, sat with her hands folded in her lap and stared at the table in front of her. "If I open to him," she said indistinctly, "I shall run behind his packtrain like a soldiers' drab. I shall lose my living and my home, most certainly my decency and probably my life. But I can't fight Pope John. To war with him is to take on all the world. . . . Yet this is his man come to try me."

The seneschal said nothing; she hadn't expected him to answer. She sat still a long time and when she looked up there were tears in her eyes. "Close the gates, Sir John," she said, "And get our people in. Advise me when these messengers arrive, but do not grant them entry."

He rose quietly. "And the guns, Lady?"

"The guns?" she said sombrely. "Take them to the gate by all means, and shot and powder for them. So far we will do as he desires. . . ."

Through all the passages and high walks of the place the drums throbbed, beating to quarters.

Henry of Rye and Deal reined his horse, and behind him the column of men boiled to a halt. A bare mile away the castle glared huge and close, smoke rising in columns from its walls; down the road, rutted between its tall banks, the messengers were galloping, trailing clouds of whitish dust that hung behind them dispersing slowly in the still air. Three sentences the couriers got out before Henry started to swear. His spurs tore gashes in the flanks of his horse; the animal leaped forward terrified, the column swirled and clattered in pursuit.

The village square was packed with visitors, the taverns doing a bustling trade; the folk who had gathered to stare were scattered by the Lord of Rye and Deal. He hauled his horse in at the outer barbican, the animal lathered and running blood. The greatgun *Growler* had indeed been brought down; but he was loaded and primed and his muzzle stared through the iron of the portcullis, and the culverin was flanking him. Behind the pieces a semicircle of men stood at ease, halberds grounded on the turf.

"Clear that bloody bridge," bellowed the Pope's lieutenant, revolving on his horse. "Captain, if those people won't get off, throw 'em in the ditch. . . ." Then to the guards, "What damn fool game is this then? Open for Pope John. . . ."

One of the men inside the bailey spoke up stolidly. "Sorry, M'Lord. Orders of the Lady Eleanor."

"Then," swore the nobleman, voice rising on a high note of rage, "Instruct Her Ladyship that Henry of Rye and Deal commands her presence to answer for her fornicating insolence. . . ."

"M'Lord," said the man inside, unmoved, "The Lady Eleanor has been informed. . . ."

Henry glared back. Turned to see his soldiers crowding the bridge, stared up at the great impassive face of the keep. Round the *donjon* the inner battlements flocked with

men. He leaned forward to rattle with his crop against the bars of the gate. "By nightfall, my talkative friend," he said, breathing heavily, "You'll hang by your heels for this, probably with your head over a slow fire. D'ye realize that?"

The guard spat deliberately at his feet.

Eleanor took her time about coming. She had bathed and changed, and dressed her hair; she would allow no hands to touch her body but her own, not even the hands of tiring-maids. She appeared holding the arm of the seneschal, her Captain of Artillery walking on her left. She wore a plain white dress, and her long brown hair was loose. A little wind moved across the bailey, blowing the hair and flattening her skirt against her thighs. Henry, who had lost enough face already, watched her fuming. Twenty paces from the gate the others stopped and she came forward alone. She saw the horsemen on the bridge, the muskets and swords, the sea of tossing blue. She halted by the breech of the greatgun, one hand resting on the iron. "Well, My Lord," she said in a low, clear voice. "What will you have of us?"

Henry's rages were famous and spectacular; spittle flecked his beard, the standers-by heard him grind his teeth. "Deliver me this place," he shouted finally. "And your ordnance and yourselves. In the name of your ruler Pope John, through the authority vested in me as his lieutenant in these islands."

She straightened her back, staring up at him through the gate. "And in the name of Charles?" she asked cuttingly. "For my liege ruler is my King. So it was with my father and so with me, My Lord; I took no vows before a foreign priest."

He drew his sword, and pointed through the bars. "*That gun*" was all he could speak.

She still remained standing by the greatgun, her fingers touching its breech and the wind moving in her hair. "And if I refuse?"

He shouted again then, waving an arm; at the gesture a soldier spurred forward lifting a bag from the pommel of his saddle. "Then your liege-folk in this Isle pay with their homes and their property and their lives" panted Henry, slashing at the cord that held the canvas closed. "It'll be

blood for iron, My Lady, blood for iron. . . ." The string came free, the bag was shaken; and down before her dropped the tongues and other parts of men, cut away as was the custom of Henry's soldiers.

There was a silence that deepened. The colour drained slowly from Eleanor's face, leaving the skin chalk-pale as the fabric of her dress; indeed the more romantic of the watchers swore afterwards the blue leached from her very eyes, leaving them lambent and dead as the eyes of a corpse. She clenched her hands slowly, slowly relaxed them again; a long time she waited, leaning on the gun, while the rage blurred her sight, rose to a high mad shrilling that seemed to ring inside her brain receded leaving her utterly cold. She swallowed; and when she spoke again every word seemed freshly chipped from ice. "*Why then,*" she said. "*You must not leave us empty handed, My Lord of Rye and Deal. Yet I fear my Growler will be a heavy load. Would not your task be lightened if his charge were sent before?*" And before any of the people round her could guess her purpose or intervene she had snatched at the firing lanyard, and *Growler* leaped back pouring smoke while echoes clapped around the waiting hills.

The heavy charge, fired at point-blank range, blew away the belly of the horse and took both Henry's feet off at the ankles; animal and rider leaped convulsively and fell with a mingled scream into the dryditch. By common consent the crossbows of the defenders played first on them; within seconds they were still, pierced by a score of shafts. The grapeshot, ploughing on, spread ruin among the soldiers on the bridge, tore furrows from the buildings of the village square beyond. Shrieks sounded, echoing from the close stone walls; the arquebusiers fired into the struggling mass on the path; the Captain rode away, leaning from his horse while his blood ribboned back across the creature's rump. Then it was finished, dying men whimpering while a thin haze of smoke drifted across the lower bailey toward the Martyr's Gate.

Eleanor leaned on the gun and bit her wrist like a child at what she had done. The seneschal was the first to reach her; but she shoved him away. "Take up that dirt," she said, pointing to the ditch. "And bury it inside the bailey walls. I will have my right of faldage from Pope John. . . ."

Then she staggered ; he caught her, lifted her and carried her to her room.

* * *

Between Boufne Mouth and Swanage lies a wild tract of heathland. Bounded on the south by the Channel, on the east by Poole harbour, to the north by the curving River Frome and to the west by Luckford Lakes, the Isle of Purbeck is crossed by a single line of hills. One pass, a *gear* or *gut* in the old tongue, carves through them to the sea ; and in that pass once stood a massive stronghold. Nearly unapproachable, seldom invested and never reduced by arms, the castle was truly a gate ; Corfe Gate, key to the entire southwest.

Below the high *motte*, crouching as has been said like a dog before its master, lies a straggling village of dour grey stone. I first saw it many years ago, arriving early on a summer morning ; and an ancient rambling place I found it, wavy and tumbledown, crusted with moss, blotched with a vivid orange lichen. The houses seemed still to watch for the approach of danger ; their windows were furtive and narrow, their doors set at a height above the street the better to resist assault. I had arranged to meet my sister there and travel with her to our estates in Wight, but soon after I arrived I learned by the then newly installed laser-phone that she had been delayed and would not in fact arrive until the following morning. Accordingly I drove on to Studland and dismissed our hoverlaunch, which had been waiting for us since the day before. When it had vanished on the horizon behind its cloud of spray I returned to Corfe Castle and engaged a room at one of its hotels. At first the woman of the house tried to tell me the place was full but a guinea or so soon changed her tune ; to the son of a gentleman of the Privy Chamber few doors are barred, even in our democratic twenty-second century.

I parked my Falcon turbine—a vintage machine of which I was inordinately proud—in the rear of the place, returned to the room that had been prepared for me and bathed and changed, for my journey from Bristol had been dusty and hot. Then dressing in a summer leotard of nylon lace and a cloak of Tyrian red I left it to discover if anything of interest still remained about the place.

The castle from which the village takes its name, or rather the shell of what was once a mighty hall, tops the steep natural mound that overlooks the clustering of houses. The sides of the hill are overgrown now with bushes and saplings and some stoutish trees, while the brook that once comprised the wet ditch is quite shadowed over. It runs grey and silent between high banks, from the sides of which ferns drop wobbling tongues of green into the water.

Access to the first of the triple baileys is gained by way of a stout bridge of stone, itself of considerable height and spanning the great ditch that runs round half the mound. Across the barbican, where once a portcullis hung and where the grooves of its passing may still be seen scored an arm's depth in the stone, are placed little clacking turnstiles; boards display coloured prints for sale and carcrests with the county coat of arms. Inside, across the sloping grass of the lowest ward, is the second outwork known incorrectly as the Martyr's Gate. Here it is claimed Elfrida stabbed Prince Edward, to secure for her own son Ethelred the throne of the land; only unfortunately for the story neither keep nor baileys then existed, the hill being crowned at that time by a hunting lodge. The Martyr's Gate itself is split, they say by the mines of Pope John; one great tower has indeed sunk from the path some dozen feet and slid a distance bodily down the hill, but its foundations still hold it firm. Surely our Norman fathers knew the ways of stone!

Above this inner gateway the ruins of the Great Keep rise a hundred feet or more, daunting with their massiveness and strength, visible far off across the flat and sour heath of Purbeck Isle. Two walls only remain and a fragment of a third; a high and slender needle, worn by the rain but secure still in the bonding of its stones. All the rest has fallen and lies scattered on the hill in chunks and masses, some of them twenty feet across and half as thick. The pathway winds between them, passing the remnants of the chapel and the great kitchens where oxen were roasted whole for the many friends of the Lords of the Isle. Gaining the highest point one sees the tower walls still reaching above, fretted with windows and galleries and the remnants of stairs; but no feet have walked them now for many years except the feet of birds. I sat in the shadow of the walls, feeling the old stone cool against my flesh, and looked

across the heath and the reaches of the harbour to where the reactors of Poole Power Station gleamed silver in the sun. Out there too, in the purplish haze of the sea, white dots showed where the hovercraft boomed over the waters of the Channel ; surely a vastly different scene from what the builders saw as they laid the first stones of that stronghold of the West.

After a while, tiring of inaction, I tried to find some oddment that would serve as a memento of my trip. I searched for some scrap of cloth left rotting in the sun, a bead, a shard of glass, but I was unsuccessful. The wreckers had performed their work too well ; nothing remained in the whole great place but its own dumb stones. One thing I did find though that seemed out of the way ; scratched on one of the inner walls was a symbol in the shape of a circle enclosing a crablike network of triangles and lines. At first I took it for the scrawling of some visitor, an idle tourist like myself ; but the thing was too regular, the marks incised too deep, to be the work of a casual hand. Across it the cloud shadows moved, birds flapped and cawed in the sky above ; its shape echoed the outlines of the reactors, its configuration stirred odd fancies. I pondered over it, but it remained a mystery. I left it finally and descended, coming at length by none-too-safe ways to the lower gate and the village street beyond.

I wandered there a time, enjoying the stares of the local girls ; curiously frank they are in their appraisal, as if a son of noble blood were no more to be respected than some local clod raised among ploughs and the feet of horses. At length I reached a churchyard. It was much overgrown, shaded with tall yews long since run to such a riot of branch and foliage that I was forced to push my way beneath. I was tempted to go back and employ myself more usefully in sinking a few pots of the local beer ; but there was a coolness and stillness about the place that I found pleasing. I finally reached an open space of tall grass, through which the shafts of crosses gleamed grey and smooth. Over it, above the housetops, the face of the castle loomed ; the monorailers whispered by it through their cutting in the chalk, on their way to Studland and the sea. I sat awhile drowsily ; and then began an odd experience, the memory of which has never left me.

I became aware of a grave, or rather of the headstone to it and the ornament, protruding as it was from the sea of ripening grass. What first attracted my attention I find difficult to say ; but I began idly parting the green stems round it and tracing the inscriptions at its base. And the first thing I saw, chiselled and lead-filled on the stone, was the symbol I had met with high on the tower of the keep. This interested me ; I bent to see what was written below and made out one word, *ELEANOR*. Then I realized I was no longer alone.

How the stranger had come so quietly through that overgrown place I couldn't understand ; but there he sat not a dozen feet away, wrapped in his cloak and watching me with an expression I couldn't read. He was an odd-looking man entirely ; his eyes were deep-set, shadowed by his brows, and seemed to flicker as I watched them, expressions chasing and shifting through them like the changes of light across an April sky. His skull was round, with light pale hair that at first I took to be silver and then decided was blond ; his hands were slim-fingered, broad across the knuckles and unadorned by rings, and beneath the cloak he wore a tunic of some white, expensive-looking cloth. Altogether a surprising person to see in such a place ; and though his manner was in no way alarming I touched the weapons at my belt for reassurance. He smiled then, though whether from some inner amusement or as a sign of welcome I couldn't say.

When he spoke I felt further eased for his voice was rich and soft and his diction that of an educated man. "And what do you think of our little place?" he asked. "We find it a pleasant enough spot, though nothing I suppose to be compared with the pleasures of the Court."

I saw that he had divined my breeding from my clothes. "My father," I said by way of introduction, "is Stephen, Lord of Bristol and Bath ; I'm Paul, the eldest of his sons. Who are you?"

He didn't answer at once. Instead he inclined his head and smiled again with an air I would have taken for insolence but for his bearing ; it seemed a man as cultured as he would scarcely descend to common cheek. "I live here," he said ; then he saw my hand still touching the marking in the stone. I withdrew it at once, not wanting to show too

much curiosity ; for that after all is a mark of the low-born. I told him my family were delayed on their way from Town, that I was staying in the village overnight ; he nodded gravely, as if used to such matters, and it occurred to me he might be a dignitary in the house of some local gentleman. He had that air about him.

Since he had obviously noticed my interest in the stone I said a little defensively "I saw the same mark up there on the castle. It seemed strange to find it on a grave."

He shook his head. "Not necessarily, My Lord. I carved the both of them."

This was rather interesting ; and he had used a higher rank than any I could claim so I suppose I was to some extent mollified. I crossed my legs and settled myself more comfortably ; we were sheltered from the sun and it would be pleasant to spend a little time in talk. "What does it mean?" I asked him.

He spread his hands. "Very little," he said. "In former times it may have been of significance ; but now its purpose has been all but served."

He was evidently disposed to make a mystery of the thing, and I felt I'd already shown enough curiosity. I changed the subject abruptly. "Whose grave is this?"

He bowed slightly, as though I'd mentioned some sacred subject. "My Lady Eleanor," he answered.

I sniffed. "My Lady you say? Then it's a poor enough monument, if she was of any quality at all."

For a moment I thought he looked angry ; but he hadn't the sort of face that showed any emotion readily. "Very well then," he said, and this time I was sure I was being mocked. "It's the grave of a servingwench."

I laughed myself then, for I'd seen enough of travelling minstrels and *jongleurs* in my time at Court ; I was sure now this character was one of these people, a man who earned his living by the telling of tall tales. "The B.B.C. fills four channels every night with stuff like that," I told him. "You'll have to do better if you expect to keep me here, or get a tip when you've finished."

He smiled again, and started to talk ; and such was his skill at storytelling that he held my interest while he built up his picture of far-off times. I didn't interrupt him till he came to the killing of Henry of Rye and Deal ; but by then

I was feeling disappointed. "Now look here," I said. "You're just putting a few new twists to a worn-out tale ; I learned the history of the Revolt of the Castles while I was at school, and promptly forgot most of it again, I can tell you. And I don't believe a word of your version anyway, with people declaiming left right and centre. It's just the sort of stuff a man like you would come up with, with winter nights ahead of him and nothing to do but dream."

Instead of answering me he fell into a sort of reverie, from which he was only roused by the voices of some children passing and shouting in the road. The noises reached us faintly, small as the sounds of insects and lost in the rustling as the wind swayed the great grasses with their tasselled purple heads. "The Revolt of the Castles," he said musingly. "Yes, I believe that's what it came to be called ; but it isn't a very accurate description of what happened."

"Well," I said a little sharply, "It's always seemed good enough to me." I was piqued ; after all I'd had the best education money could buy, at Winchester and at Sherborne, and here was this rural philosopher trying to put me back in prep school and turn all my views upside down.

He shook his head. "You must remember," he said, "that for many years it was politically expedient to play down the motives that led to the Revolt, and make the various Barons who took part into a gang of cut-throats only interested in personal gain. To a large extent that attitude still holds good ; habits of thought seem to die hardest of all. The Castles did revolt, certainly ; but at the outset at least they didn't fight their King. Nor, and this is very important, did they rebel against John and the Church ; they were forced into what they did by the excesses of the Roman mercenaries in England."

I was getting ready to answer angrily again ; then I remembered I had once debated his very point at Sherborne. His view of history was not uncommon among the more radically minded of my fellows ; I smiled at him faintly and let him go on.

"Just imagine the situation," he said, and for the first time his face showed animation. "For centuries we'd been bleeding ourselves white fighting wars that brought nobody a profit except the Popes. Largely through us they'd con-

quered the known world. They forced us into the pact with Spain that destroyed the Belgo-Swedish Axis ; we took the brunt of the Lutheran wars that left them in control of most of central Europe ; they owned the Americas, Australasia, India, most of Africa. . . . Just think," he said heatedly, "of the wealth that would have poured into England if a fraction of our conquests had stayed under our own rule. We would have been a world power without a doubt, not afraid to show our flag in any corner of the globe ; as it was we remained a cluster of backward islands living in near-feudalism, dominated by the symbols of the Second Rome."

"It was a situation that couldn't last indefinitely of course. That it endured as long as it did was a tribute to the genius of Gisevius the Great. Twisted he undoubtedly was, with his ambition to bring about a world reversion to feudalism ; but his English reforms, his re-establishment of a so-called Norman aristocracy with the King as head of state and of the government, had the military effect the Popes had been trying to bring about for a century after the Parma-Sidonia invasion. As a nation England lost unity ; power was concentrated into the hands of a minority group of wealthy landowners all more concerned with keeping their own estates secure than involving themselves in foreign policy. What nobody realized until it was too late was what a dangerously unstable arrangement it actually was. When the Revolt got thoroughly under way the very backwardness of the country, the poor roads and lack of any real central control, worked in our favour. After centuries of relative peace and quiet, with nothing to do but hawk and wench and sit in their outdated castles, the new Normans were more than ready for a fight ; and with resistance split between half a thousand strongpoints even a strategist like John was more or less helpless. His so-called army anyway was run by a handful of Continental firebrands all keen to carve themselves out petty principalities every time a chance offered ; whenever they won a minor victory they sat down and caroused for a month, and half a dozen of them ended up calling themselves kings."

He seemed very convinced of the strength of his arguments ; and I thought with some amusement that only in a place as antiquated as this strange Isle of Purbeck could

one find such a romantic concern with the past. Nonetheless this wasn't what I'd waited to hear. "I admit," I said, "that there's truth in a lot of what you say ; but all the same I'd be grateful if you'd go on with the story you were telling and not cloud it with masses of philosophy. I much preferred you as a minstrel rather than a sort of politician and preacher combined."

He smiled at that, though for a moment I'd thought he might get annoyed. But he didn't immediately continue. "How was it," I said, "or at least how was it in your version, that Eleanor, by whose singularly plain monument we seem to be sitting, brought the anger of Pope John down on her head, and the attentions of so important a man as the Captain of the Cinque Ports?"

"To explain that," he said, "I shall have to start again at a point even more remote in time."

This, as nearly as I can remember it, is how he went on.

* * *

For most of her life Eleanor, only daughter of Robert, last of the Lords of Purbeck, lived in seclusion in the great hall set between the hills. She was a strange child, secretive and shy, beloved of the Fairies who according to popular report assisted at her very conception. Though practical and level-headed in other respects, Eleanor never made any attempt to scotch the rumours of her paranormal origin, seeming instead to take pleasure in them. "For," she would explain, "my father often told his guests the tale of how he rode north that day to bring my mother home. When he ran out and jumped on his horse everybody was convinced he'd taken leave of his senses ; but he always claimed it was the People of the Heath that drove him to it, showing him visions so beautiful they sent him completely wild." Then her face would cloud ; for Anne Strange had died in childbirth, and Eleanor felt very keenly the loss of the mother she had never known.

Too keenly sometimes for her father's peace of mind, Robert, who never remarried, brooded over the child's imaginings. Once, when she was very small, she walked in her sleep. It was on a night of wind, with a full gale roar-

ing up from the Channel barely five miles away ; one of those nights when the nervous of the household kept to their rooms, swearing they heard the laughter of the Old Ones in the gusts that hissed and droned round the high stone of the keep. Eleanor's nurse, looking in to see the child was quiet, found her room empty ; a hue and cry was raised, and the whole great complex of buildings searched. They found Eleanor high in the *donjon*, at the head of an ancient stairway unused for years. Her eyes were closed but as they reached her they heard her calling. "Mother," she shouted. "Mother, are you there. . . ." They led her down, careful not to startle her ; for it was well known that such walkers were under the spell of the Old Ones, who took their souls very easily if they woke. Eleanor herself seemed oblivious of the whole affair ; but it was not so. She referred to it days later, when her nurse was dressing her. "My mother was very pretty, wasn't she?" she said ; then thoughtfully, "She wanted to play ; but she had to go away. . . ." Robert frowned when he heard, and pulled his beard and swore ; the girl was packed off to relatives in France, but when she came back six months later she was very little changed.

As a child Eleanor was frequently lonely ; for the castle contained no other children of her own age except the children of the serving people, from whom she was largely secluded by barriers of rank and class. Most of her days were passed quietly in the company of her nurse and later her tutor, from whom she learned the several languages of the land. She proved to have a quick and receptive brain ; she soon mastered the Latin that had remained the tongue of the cultured world, even more quickly the churl-talk of the peasant. It worried her father slightly to hear the old syllables bang and splatter from her lips ; but because of it she was greatly respected by the few commoners with whom she came in contact. Indeed she seemed to identify herself more with the ordinary people of the countryside than with those of her own rank ; which in a way was understandable considering that she was only partly of noble blood. The peasants still lived and were governed by the ancient rhythms of moon and sun, ploughing and reaping, death and birth ; and all old things, whether or not sanctified by the rulers of Rome, appealed strongly to her. Some-

times she would go with her nurse and her father's seneschal, and play on the nearby beaches. She would watch the endless roll and thunder of the sea, and ask strange questions of the seneschal; such as whether the Popes, from their golden throne, could order the waves that washed the shores of England, marching in their violet ranks to break against the ancient cliffs. He would smile at her, answering heresy with discretion, till she grew bored and scampered off to hunt for shells or seaweed on the beach, or pick the crinoid fossils from the rocks and give them him for fairy beads. She felt an odd sympathy with the fabric of the land itself; once she took a flake of shale and pressed it to her throat and cried, and said that day she was made right through of stone, dark and stern as the cliffs of Kimmeridge coal and as indomitable.

Her waywardness caused in the end her removal to Londinium. In her sixteenth year her father caught her with a bailiff, learning the handling of his motor vehicle; how to slip the bands of its gearbox and drive it in forward and reverse round the slopes of the outer bailey. Maybe some gesture, some turn of the head, reminded Robert too clearly of the girl who had died so many years ago; he pulled his daughter squawking from the machine, clipped her ear and chased her off to her room. The resulting interview, compounded as it was of Eleanor's wounded dignity and her father's always uncertain temper, proved disastrous. Eleanor vented her feelings in multilingual phrasing new even to Robert; he retaliated with a strap, the buckle of which left several marks that threatened permanence. He confined his daughter to her chamber for a week; on the day of her release she refused to leave and it was a fortnight before he caught sight of her down below the wet-ditch messing with some soldiers out at target practice. He sent immediately for his seneschal. A time at the Court of Londinium seemed the only thing for Eleanor; there would be no more riding and hawking, and certainly no consorting with mechanicals. She must be brought if possible to a realization of her station, and instructed in the skills expected in a lady of good birth. To the seneschal Robert entrusted the task, with the purely private directive that his daughter must be cultivated or killed. She left a fortnight later, with many snorts and head-tossings. He waited by the

gate to see her go, but she ignored him ; that was a flash of temper she regretted the rest of her days, for she never saw him alive again.

The accident happened on a feast day, when the lower bailey was filled with the tents of acrobats and jugglers and sweetmeat sellers, while the place resounded to shouts and laughter and the clatter of cudgels where the young bloods of the surrounding villages tried their strength one against another. Robert's horse bucked as he crossed the outer bridge, and threw him ; he struck his head against the stone, and fell into the dry ditch. The fair was quietened, and doctors brought from Durnovaria ; but his skull was crushed, and he never reopened his eyes. Eleanor, summoned by a signal that fled from Challow Hill to Pontes inside an hour, rode hard ; but she came too late.

She buried her father at Wimborne, in the ancient Minster there, in the painted tomb he had built to share with his wife ; and the party rode back slowly to Corfe Gate, the horses and the motors dressed with black, the slack drums thudding out a dirge. It was still September ; but a chilling wind moaned in from the sea, and the sky was grey as iron.

Eleanor reined when she came in sight of the castle, and waved the rest of the party on down the long dim road. The seneschal waited, his horse fretting in the wind, till the mourners had passed nearly out of sight in the distance ; then she turned to him, her cloak whipping round her shoulders. She looked older and very tired, dark shadows under her eyes and tear tracks marking her cheeks. "Well," she said, "here I am a great lady ; and that is the house I own. . . ."

He waited silently, knowing her mind ; she swallowed, and pushed the hair out of her eyes. "John," she said, "how many years did you serve my father, Robert?"

He sat his horse impassively and considered before he answered. Then finally, "Many years, My Lady."

"And his father before him?"

Again the same answer. "Many years. . . ."

"Yes," she said. "You served him well ; I left him alone, and sent no word. And it was all over such a trifling little thing, I've almost forgotten why we first fell out. Now it's too late of course." She sat quiet a moment, stroking the

neck of her horse as it fidgeted in the cold. Then, "Have you a sword?"

"Yes, Lady."

"Then give it me, and get down off your horse. This much I can do. . . ."

He waited while she held the sword and looked unseeing at the damascene-work on the blade. "A title is a little empty thing," she said, "to such as you. Yet will you take it from me?"

He bowed; and she touched his shoulder lightly with the steel. "Whether the King confirms my choice or no," she said, "to us you will be Sir John. . . ." Then she turned her horse and rode hard for the castle, narrowing her eyes to see up at its glooming battlements and towers. So she came home, to a mourning place; and soon to the anger of Pope John.

From the outset Eleanor's position was a curious one. The successive Lords of Purbeck had held their lands in feoff from the King; under normal circumstances she could have expected to be married off fairly rapidly and to see the demesnes granted to another. But she was, or would one day be, an heiress in her own right as granddaughter of the last of the Strange family; and in the restricted economy of the times the annual tax paid by that huge house accounted for a measurable proportion of the revenue to the Crown. Since Charles, King of England and nominally at least of the Americas, was expecting to make an extended tour of the New World in the spring he was content to let matters rest at least until his return; Eleanor was confirmed in her position of authority, although there were many up and down the country who resented the decision.

She took her duties with great seriousness. One of her first self-allotted tasks was to tour the boundaries of her lands with a circuit judge, settling such petty differences as had arisen since her father's death. She rode informally, with only her seneschal in attendance, stopping off at cottages and farms as the fancy took her, speaking to all in the language of their birth, and her liege-folk scattered over the breadth and length of Dorset were much impressed. Where she found hardship she alleviated it not by gifts of money, too easily spent in the local taverns, but with cloth-

ing and food and grants of freeholds. She saw much suffering, and was shocked by it ; she began in fact to feel dissatisfaction with her own way of life.

"It's all very well Sir John," she said one evening shortly after her return to Corfe Gate. "But I've really achieved nothing at all. I suppose one's bound to get a sort of glow of wellbeing from a few small charities but looked at in a broad view they're pretty meaningless. One or two people are probably better off for not having to scrape and save and find their rent every week but what about all the rest I haven't been able to do anything for? As long as the Church applies a censorship to certain forms of progress, which is what she does, however strenuously the Popes deny it, we shall always be a scrappy little nation living just above the famine line. But what else am I to do?" They were dining in the sixteenth century hall beside the great keep ; she waved a hand at the furnishings, the richly hung walls, and spluttered over a mouthful of food. "I can't pretend," she said, "that I don't like this life, and being able to buy horses and dogs when I want and nylons and perfumes, things the ordinary people never get to see let alone afford. . . . You know," she added, grinning suddenly, "when my poor father sent me off to Town I had a fancy to run away and give it all up ; just live the simple life, working the soil and rearing a family like a peasant girl. Only what I've seen has changed all that ; I realize now I should have ended up having innumerable children by some brawny oaf who stank of pigs, and dying before I was thirty from sheer hard work. Or am I just getting cynical? Do tell me, you say so very little any more."

He poured wine for her, smiling.

"I was arguing with Father Sebastian the other day," she said thoughtfully. "I quoted the thing about giving all you have to the poor. He said that was all very well but you had to come to terms with the Scriptures and realize there had to be teachers and leaders for the people's own good. It seemed an awful get-out to me, and I couldn't help saying so. I told him if the Church would sell half her altar plate she could buy shoes for everybody in the country, and a lot else besides ; and that if the Pope would make a start in Rome I'd see about getting rid of a few job lots of furniture down in Corfe. I'm afraid he didn't take very

kindly to it. I know it was wrong of me, but he annoys me sometimes ; he's so pious, and it seems to mean so very little. He'd walk miles in the snow to pray for a sick child, he's a very good man ; but if there was more money about to start with maybe the child wouldn't have been taken ill. It all seems so unnecessary. . . ."

The winter was hard and long, the brooks and soil frozen like stone, even the rim of the sea sharded with ice. The towers clacked, on days when the Signallers could clear their arms of ice, with news of other parts of the country suffering as badly or worse. The spring that followed was late and cold, and the summer nearly as bad. Charles postponed his trip to the New World till the following year, spending his time, according to the semaphores, in organising relief schemes for the areas worst hit by famine. When autumn came round again, and the rush-bearing to the churches, the worst news of all arrived, brought by the urgently clattering grids. The taxation system of the country was to be reviewed ; commissioners were already at work assessing contributions to be made by each area not in money but in kind.

Eleanor swore when the news was brought to her, and would certainly have given the officials a hot reception had they presented themselves at her hall ; but nobody came near. Instead she was supplied via the semaphores with a list of the goods she would be expected to levy. Other parts of the country had been taxed in everything from turned ware to parsnips ; Dorset's contribution would be in butter, grain and stone.

"It's quite ridiculous," fumed Her Ladyship, stamping up and down the little room that served her as office and study combined. "Butter and stone are all very well, or would be if they didn't represent extra taxes ; but *grain* ! The people who drew this up must know very well there's practically no arable farming round here at all ; what little wheat we do grow is strictly for our own use and after a summer like we've had there'll be barely enough of that to go round, I'm confidently expecting to have to set up soup kitchens in the bailey like they did once or twice in my father's time. In Italy they don't seem to have much idea of what a bad season can do to the farm produce ; not that I suppose for a minute this junk ever came from

Rome. It was probably drawn out by some fat-paunched little clerk in Paris or Bordeaux who's never seen England and doesn't want to and will sell our stuff over there at vast profits as fast as we can ship it. Anybody would think they're deliberately trying to break us. If I squeeze all they demand out of the folk round about there'll be deaths from starvation before the spring; on the other hand why I should buy in from the Newworlders in Poole, give them back what I took from them and ruin myself in the process I can't imag——"

She stopped dead; and the look in her eyes showed plainly she'd just received the import of a crude lesson in economics. "Sir John," she said firmly, "I'm not going to do it. There's no reason, except pure maliciousness, why I should either starve my people or pauperize myself." She tapped her teeth thoughtfully with a stylus. "Have the towers send this message," she said. "Our crops are bad, if we meet these taxes we shall be in trouble before the spring. Tell them we'll pay with a double levy next autumn; at least that'll give us the chance to get some more acreage under cultivation, unless of course they decide to change their demands by then. Failing that we'll make up in . . . oh, worsted, manufactured goods, whatever they want; but grain, no. It's out of the question. So the message was passed; and a second signal was routed to Londinium informing the King of her reply to Rome.

Next day the towers brought word that Charles was displeased, and had ordered Eleanor to pay; but by then it was too late, her answer was already clattering across France. "I'm afraid there was no help for it," she said to her seneschal, "but to present him with a *fait accompli*; what I'd like to have said to him, and to Pope John as well, was that there was no blood to be got by squeezing Dorset stone, though they were both very welcome to come on down and try." She was sitting at her dressing table, making up her face as she had been taught at Court; she drew a careful bow on her lips, blotted with a tissue. "God knows the Church is rich enough already," she finished bitterly. "What she expects to gain by sitting on the necks of a few poor savages in England, I have no idea. . . ." She dismissed the whole subject; at the best of times politics tired her rapidly, and she was becoming very interested in

certain surreptitious alterations she was making to her home.

The most daring of them, and the most heretical, was the installation of electric lighting. She had commissioned a craftsman of the village to build and wind a generator, and proposed to drive it by a steam engine of a type designed to be fitted into lorries. The work had to be done secretly as although the principles of the electromotive force had been known for many years the Church had never sanctioned its domestic use. The completed unit was to be housed in one of the towers of the lower bailey wall, far enough away for its clanking not to disturb the household's rest, and Eleanor expected if not spectacular results, at least enough light to dispel the worst gloom of winter. And heating too, if things went well; for she had remembered from her schooling that a wire, suitably wound on an earthenware former, could be made to glow redly if sufficient difference in potential could be created between its ends. To her questions as to whether her generator would bring this state of affairs about, the seneschal replied quietly that such a thing was not inconceivable, but further than that he refused to be drawn.

"Why Sir John," said Eleanor archly, "you don't sound as if you approve. Last winter I swear I had frostbite in at least nine of my toes, and that in spite of sleeping in flannel so thick the Pope himself would have been impressed by my rectitude. Would you begrudge me what little comfort is left to my declining years?" He smiled at that, but wouldn't answer; and shortly afterward the generator began to chuff and an element glowed brightly at the foot of Her Ladyship's bed, frightening the wits out of a chambermaid who ran to the Serjeant of the Pantry with a tale that the stones themselves were burning, grinning at her with scarlet mouths.

The same day Eleanor received a visit from a Captain of the Guild of Signallers. They sent runners from the outer barbican and she changed hastily, receiving him in the Great Hall with her seneschal and several gentlemen of the castle in attendance. A man of such status commanded great respect in the old times and Eleanor loved the Guild with all her heart though they had never been and never would be subjects of hers. The respect was mutual; for

who else, on the occasion of Robert's fortieth birthday, would have been taken to the semaphore and let to spell her father's name with her own hands, on the levers only Guildsmen were allowed to move?

The Captain came in stolidly, a grizzled man in worn green leather with the silver brassard and crossed lanyards of his rank displayed in place. His eyes took in the electric light with which the place was flooded, but he made no comment. He came straight to the point, speaking bluntly as was the way of the Guild ; for when Kings watched their semaphores as eagerly as commoners they had never found a use for fancy words. "My Lady," he said, "His Eminence the Archbishop of Londinium took horse today for Purbeck, bringing with him a force of some seventy men, hoping to take you unprepared and make you yield your hall and your demesnes to John."

She went pale, but a red anger-spot glowed on each cheek. "How can you know this, Captain?" she asked coolly. "London is well over a day away, and the towers have been quiet. Had it been reported, I would have been told."

He shifted his feet, where he stood with legs apart on the carpeting of the dais. "The Guild fears no man," he said finally. "Our messages are for all who can to read. But there are times, and this is one of them, when words are best not given to the grids. Then there are other, swifter means."

There was a hush at that, for he meant necromancy ; and that was not a subject to be lightly bandied, even in the free air of Eleanor's hall. The seneschal alone understood his meaning fully ; and to him the Signaller bowed, recognising a knowledge greater and more ancient than his own. Eleanor caught the look that passed between them, and shivered ; then she recovered herself and tossed her head. "Well, Captain," she said, "our gratitude is deep. How deep, only you can know. If you have nothing to add to what you've told me, can I give you wine? My Hall would be honoured."

He bowed again, accepting the gesture ; and few enough there were who could have offered it for the Guildsmen did not come often into the houses of the uninitiated, even the great of the land.

She roused out some two score of her liegefolk and armed them, and when His Eminence came in sight of Corfe towers the semaphores had already informed him of the state of things inside. He quartered his men in the village and came on with an escort of some half dozen, making great show of the peacefulness of his intentions. They were conducted through the outer gate by a conspicuously well-armed guard and taken to the Great Hall, where they were told the Lady Eleanor would receive them. So she did; but not for over an hour, and the great man was fuming and striding the carpet well before that. She hung back in her room, seeing to the last details of her makeup and dress; she had previously sent for her seneschal and asked him to attend her.

"Sir John," she said, adjusting a tiny coronet on her hair, "I'm afraid this is going to be a difficult meeting from every point of view. I don't suppose for a moment Charles knows anything about all this, which makes His Eminence's behaviour suspicious in the extreme; but I can hardly accuse an Archbishop of attempted treason. Apart from that he's obviously come to demand something I can't give him, or rather something that I—ouch—that I refuse to for what seem to me to be excellent reasons. Yet he's made such an exhibition of his quiet intentions that anything I say is bound to look churlish. I wish the King would stick up for himself a bit more; it's all very well people calling him Charles the Good and pelting him with rose petals every time he rides through London, but what it all comes down to is he's very clever at sitting on the fence placating everybody. I'm getting so tired of strangers lording it over England, even if it is heresy to say so."

The seneschal thought carefully before he spoke. "His Eminence is certainly a crafty talker if what I've heard is right," he said at length. "And it's also true that you're not in much of a position for bargaining. But I don't think you can be too hard on Charles, My Lady; he's got a difficult enough job keeping this mess of Angles and Scots and so-called Normans out of trouble and satisfying Rome at the same time."

She looked at him very straight, sucking at her lower lip with her teeth. It was a trick he hadn't seen for many years; her mother used to do it, when she was angry or

upset. "If we fought, Sir John," she said. "If all of us just straightforwardly rebelled, what would our chances be?"

He spread his hands. "Against the Blue? The Blue is like the blue of Ocean, Lady; endlessly it runs, from here to China for all I know. Nobody fights the sea."

"Sometimes," she said, "you're not much of a help. . . ." She angled her mirror, tweaked carefully at an eyebrow hair that had got itself out of line. "I don't know at all," she said tiredly. "Give me a sick dog or a cat, or even Master Gwilliam's old jalopy down there in the yard with its carburettor bunged up again, and I know where I stand; I'd have a go at putting things right even if I didn't make much of a job of it. But Churchmen, and High Churchmen at that, put shivers up my back. Maybe they think with my father gone they can bully me easier than some of our great barons; but I'm certain now we've made our stand we shall have to keep to it or we shall finish up worse off than ever, they're sure to impose some sort of fine for defying them in the first place." She rose, satisfied at last that her appearance couldn't be bettered; but at the door of the chamber she balanced suddenly on one leg, spat on her fingers and dragged a stocking seam straight. She looked up at the seneschal, with his fair round head and the odd features that looked now just as they had looked when she was a child. "Sir John," she said softly. "You who see all and say so very little . . . would my father have behaved like this?"

He waited. Then, "He would; were his people involved, and his own good name."

"Then you will follow me?"

"I was your father's man," he said. "And I am yours, My Lady."

She shivered. "Sir John," she said, "keep very close. . . ." She ducked under the lintel and clattered down the steps to meet the delegation.

His Eminence was friendly, to a point jovial; until it came to the matter of the unpaid tribute. "You must realize my child," said Londinium roundly, taking a turn up the hall and back, "Pope John, your spiritual Father and the ruler of the known world, isn't a man you can dismiss so readily or whose favours or displeasure can be taken lightly. Now I. . . ." He spread his hands. "I'm

merely a messenger and an advisor. What you say to me or I to you may be of no account. But once a word travels beyond these walls, and that it must if my duty's to be done, then you and all your people will suffer; for John will crack this little place like an egg. His will must be obeyed, all over the world."

He walked back to Eleanor. "You're very young," he said genially, "and I can't help feeling toward you perhaps as your father might, if he were alive to counsel you." His fingers lingered on her arm; and Eleanor, perhaps from sheer nervousness, raised an eyebrow. Under the circumstances, it was an unfortunate gesture. His Eminence reddened, and strained his temper with an effort. "Find this tribute," he said. "Levy it somehow, make it up any way you choose; but get it, and send it. Do it inside the week and you can still catch the last of the ships for France. But if you delay and the weather worsens, if your merchantmen are lost or stray into out-of-the-way ports with your grain, then with the spring I promise you John will reach out to punish. And rightly too, for the half of all you own here belongs to him. You hold your place, as you know very well, by his good will alone."

"I hold my place," said Eleanor icily, "by the favour of my liege-lord Charles; and that you know, My Lord, as well as I. My father promised loyalty at his knee, kissing his hand according to the ancient way. I too, until I am released, will follow him. And no other, Sir. . . ."

There was a quietness, in which the clacking of the Challow tower could be clearly heard. Londinium seemed to swell, puffing himself up beneath his fur-trimmed robes much in the manner of a frog. "Your liege-lord," he said, and he obviously found it hard to keep from shouting, "has ordered you to send that grain. So you flout both Pope and King. . . ."

"I cannot send what I do not own," said Eleanor patiently. "What grain I do have spare must be released to my people, or there will be famine in the land by Christmas. What will John have, a countryside of corpses to testify his strength?"

The Churchman glared, but would say no more; and she withdrew, leaving affairs thus unhappily in the balance.

Matters came to a head in the evening, when dinner was

prepared for the delegation in the Great Hall. The place was made cheerful by the light of many lamps and candles, and servants stood by with bundles of spares beneath their arms to replace the dips as they burned down in the sconces. Her Ladyship would have used the electric light, but at the last moment the seneschal had prevailed against such rashness ; His Eminence would never have sat at meat beneath such open evidence of heresy. The exhausted globes with their delicate filaments of carbon had been withdrawn into the roof, the wall switches were hidden by drapes and there was no visible sign of Eleanor's disaffection. She sat on the dais, in the chair her father used to occupy ; the seneschal was on her right, her Captain of Artillery to her left. Opposite her were the Churchmen and such of the military as had been allowed inside the gates.

All went well until His Eminence touched sympathetically on the early death of Her Ladyship's mother. The Captain choked, and converted the sound hastily into a cough ; all the household knew that that was Eleanor's sorest point. She had drunk more than was good for her, again out of nervousness ; and she rose instantly to the bait. "This, My Lord, is very interesting," she said. "For had a surgeon been allowed to help my mother, perhaps she would still be with us now. I've read you Romans were once more daring than you are now ; for the great Caesar himself was born by cutting his mother's womb, yet now you deem the trick heinous to God——"

"My Lady——"

"Also I have heard," said Eleanor, hiccuping slightly, "that airs may be distilled, the breathing of which quietens the body and the brain, so that one wakes from a mighty pain as from a sleep ; yet Pope Paul I think it was disowned them, saying the pain was sent from God to be a reminder of sacred duty here on earth. Also that acids sprayed into the air will kill the very essence of disease ; yet doctors work on us with unwashed hands. Are we to learn from this, it is better to die of holiness than live in heresy?"

His Eminence rose bristling. "Heresy," he began, "exists in many forms in each and every one of us ; in you, My Lady, perhaps most of all. And were it not for the charity of Pope John——"

"Charity?" interrupted Eleanor bitterly. "Your duty here is scarce concerned with that. It seems to me My Lord, the Church is fast forgetting the meaning of the word; for I would rather sell the drapes out of my house, were I Pope John, than starve my subjects in a foreign isle, unlettered idiots though they well might be."

Londinium of course could scarcely be expected to stomach such a double-barrelled insult; as well as a direct attack upon his ruler and the Church it was a slight against his own person as one of the very idiots to whom Eleanor had likened the English. He banged the table, red in the face with rage; but before his harangue was well enough started the household's Signaller-Page ran in with his pad, tore off the top sheet and handed it to his mistress. She stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment, lips forming the words it bore; then she passed it to the seneschal. "My Lord," she said, "you must be seated, and spare your breath for awhile. This message just arrived; I want it read to everybody in the hall."

The Archbishop's eyes went automatically to the windows, curtained against the night; he knew as well as the others present that only matters of the greatest importance would induce the Guild to light torches on its signal-arms. The seneschal rose, bowing slightly to the dignitaries. "My Lords," he said, "as earnest of his support for us here in the West, Charles today despatched tribute doubling the amount we owe to Rome. Moreover he confirms the Lady Eleanor in her governorship of the Isle and its demesnes; and in further witness of his trust in her sends to Corfe from his arsenal at Woolwich the greatgun *Growler* in company of a platoon of his own men. Also from Isca the culverin *Prince of Peace*; the demi-cannon *Loyalty*, and shot and powder for him——"

The words were lost in an outbreak of applause from the lower tables; men shouted, and banged their cups and glasses on the wood. The seneschal raised his hand. "Also," he said, eyes twinkling, "his Majesty requests His Eminence of Londinium, *wherever he might be*, to attend him at his earliest convenience to confer on matters of State."

The Archbishop opened his mouth, and closed it abruptly again. Eleanor leaned back wiping her face and feeling reprieved from death. "He *did* know," she whispered to the

seneschal under cover of the din. "And look, we've made him stand. Who knows, perhaps the next time he will fight. . . ."

Two of the guns duly arrived ; but the demicannon fell into a marsh while making the crossing into the island and the best efforts of the soldiers failed to lift him, giving rise in later times to the saying that Loyalty was lost east of Luckford Lakes.

* * *

After the guns arrived Eleanor breathed easier for a time ; for though the armament was little more than a token its effect on the spirits of the household was considerable. Also the castle was recognised to be one of the most impregnable in the country ; Her Ladyship spoke of that one cold evening a month after the discomfiture of the Churchmen. She was pacing the second bailey, muffled in a cloak against the chilling wind from the sea ; she paused by *Growler*, still limbered up as they had brought him in, and ran her fingers along the cold iron of his breech. Her seneschal stopped at her elbow. "Tell me Sir John," she said skittishly, "what would our Father in Rome have done if Charles hadn't made up our taxes? Do you think he would really have faced this creature and myself, both virgins in our way and still unblooded, for such poor chaff as we hold here in our granaries?"

The seneschal thought carefully, almond-shaped eyes brooding out over the battlements, looking at nothing in the gathering dark. "Certainly, Eleanor," he said—no other would have dared to be so familiar—"His Holiness would have been very tempted to put us down. He wouldn't dare let defiance go unpunished for fear of setting the whole country in revolt. But fortunately that problem's over for a time ; you can enjoy Christmas at least entertaining those of your father's friends who'll come to visit you in Corfe."

She looked up at the keep, frowning and black in the night, and at the scatter of softly glowing windows where her people were preparing beds and meals. Here and there harsher flares showed where her heretical engine was again supplying light to the place. The sound of the generator came faintly over the bailey walls, eddying and fading as

the wind blew. "Yes," she said, shivering suddenly. "The cows in their stalls and the horses, the motors shut away against the frost—I bet Sir Gwilliam's burning peat under his confounded cylinder block again for fear the cold bursts it, one day he'll have the whole place going up in smoke—we shall be nicely shut away too Sir John, and safe at least still spring."

He waited, gravely. She half turned to him, seeming to expect some remark ; then she brushed her hair impatiently where the wind flapped it across her eyes. "I wasn't fooled," she said. "And neither were you I'm quite sure. Not even by His Eminence riding out all smiles, showering blessings and good advice. Charles will go to the New World next year, won't he?"

"Yes, Lady."

"Yes," she said broodingly. "Then all those unpleasant layabouts at Court, and all the little Popish dogs scattered round the country, will get up on their back legs and run about to see what mischief they can make ; and we shall be high on the list of priorities, I've got no doubt of that. We've shown our teeth, and not been beaten for it ; they won't let things rest at that. John might have a long arm, but his memory's even more remarkable."

He waited again ; he knew more than she, but some secrets were not his to tell. "And, My Lady?"

She touched the gun again, frowning down at its great black barrel. "Why," she said. "Then they will come for these. . . ."

She turned away suddenly, tucking her arm through his. "But as you say, we needn't worry till the better weather ; John will need good seas in case he has to back his little people with arms and more valour than any of them own. Come on Sir John, or I shall get worse depressed than ever ; I hear a new showman came into the village this morning and Sir Gwill has bought his services for the night. We can have a look at the tricks he's got to offer, though I expect we'll have seen most of them before ; and afterwards I'll get you to tell me some of your lying stories about the times before there were castles on our hilltops and before the world knew anything of Churches, high or low."

He smiled at her in the dark. "All lies, Eleanor? You

seem to develop less and less respect for your oldest retainer as the years go on."

She stopped, silhouetted against the brightness of a window. "All lies, Sir John," she said, trying to keep her voice firm; for she spoke of forbidden things. "When I want the truth from you, you'll know. . . ."

Christmas came and went pleasantly; the weather was neither so hard nor so cold as the year before and enough travelling entertainers, musicians and the like passed through the district to provide variety at nights. One man in particular fascinated Eleanor. He brought with him a machine, a strange stilt-legged device with complex parts. A strip of unknown substance was fed into it, a handle turned; a limelight spat and hissed and pictures, flickering and seemingly alive, danced across a screen rigged on the other side of the chamber. Her Ladyship made efforts to buy the apparatus, but it was not for sale. Instead she added to her mechanical armoury, setting two more generators clanking and hissing beside the first. The globes, always fragile and short-lived, were replaced by arc lamps that gave a more ferocious light; with her own hands she made shades for them to soften the glare. One of the brachets spawned a great yelping litter of pups that ran through the corridors and kitchens piping and squeaking, stealing from the cooks' soup bowls, tearing up everything they could find with their tiny teeth. She was delighted and kept them all, even the runts.

When winter gave way to the blustering wetness of March nothing more had been heard either from Charles or the Church concerning the events of the year before. Nothing out of the ordinary happened except that a few days before His Majesty was due to leave the semaphores brought a request from Sir Anthony Hope, Provost-Marshal of England and the King's hereditary Champion, who asked to be allowed to hunt the Purbeck Chase for a few days and enjoy the pleasure and delight of Eleanor's company.

She pulled a face at the seneschal when he told her. "As far as I can remember the man's hugely conceited and a complete bore; and anyway the season's nearly finished, we don't want him trampling about with his great hooves just as everything's settling down to breed. But I suppose

there's nothing to be done except put up with him, he's far too influential to upset over a trifle. I can't help wishing though he'd go up to the Taverners at Sherborne or over into the Marches like he did last year. You'll have to help me out with him I'm afraid Sir John, I've got nothing in common with him at all ; after all he is almost old enough to be my father, though perish the thought of that." She sniffed. "But if he sends any more of his laboriously gallant messages I shall feel very inclined to greet him like Daddy did that famous Golden Eagle. . . ."

The towers of the Guild sent back her agreement and soon brought news that Sir Anthony was on his way in company with some score of soldiers of his household. Eleanor shrugged, and ordered extra barrels of beer to be laid in. "Well, the ground's still pretty soft," she said. "There's always the chance his horse's foot will turn and break his fat neck for him, though I suppose we mustn't hope for miracles."

Certainly none took place and within a few days Sir Anthony arrived at her hall, where his men were quartered in the lower wards and played havoc with the serving girls till Eleanor took the matter up more than firmly with their master. The party stayed two weeks and Her Ladyship, who at first had been inclined to be suspicious about the whole affair, found herself relaxing and merely wishing Sir Anthony, his gang of roughnecks and his repertoire of tall boasts all safely back inside the walls of Londinium. But on the fifteenth morning came disaster. When dawn broke, England was at peace ; by nightfall the first of the acts had taken place that would lead inevitably to war with Rome.

Eleanor had risen early and ridden out to hunt, accompanied as usual by her seneschal and some half dozen servants and falconers of the household. They took dogs and a brace of hawks, hoping to see a little sport before Sir Anthony and his cavalcade spoiled their chances too much. For a time they were fortunate ; then one of the gentlefalcons missed her kill and refused to come to the swinging of the lure. Instead she winged away across the heath, flying strongly and high, making apparently for Poole harbour and the sea. Eleanor galloped after her, swearing and banging her heels into her horse ; she had

put in a lot of time on that bird and didn't intend to lose her if she could help it. She rode fast, letting her mount pick its way among the tussocks and clumps of gorse, and soon outdistanced the rest of the party; the seneschal alone kept pace.

After a mile or two it became evident the bird was gone beyond recall. There was no sign of her, and they had already travelled so far that Corfe towers were tiny in the distance. Eleanor reined in, panting. "It's no good, we've lost her. Honestly. . . ." She pulled the gauntlet off her wrist, the jesses still hanging from the cuff, and hooked it over her saddlebow. "I'm beginning to see why they talk about being bird-brained. . . . Sir John, what is it?"

He was staring back the way they had come, narrowing his eyes against the cool bright sun. "Lady," he said urgently, "the hawk stooped on a hare, and fell beneath an eagle. . . ." He spun his horse. "Ride, quickly. Make for the Wareham road. . . ."

She saw them then; a line of specks strung out across the heath. Horsemen, moving fast. They were too far off for their features to be seen but there was little doubt of their identity; Sir Anthony had sprung his trap at last. Eleanor glared right and left. The pursuers were well-spaced; hopeless to try to outflank by drawing across their line. She turned in the saddle. Ahead of her a track stretched into distance, a white thread laid across the heath; beyond was the pale glow of the sea. There was no doubt about the way; she spun her horse, flicking it into a gallop.

The men behind, their mounts fresher, gained steadily; a half mile farther on they were close enough to call to her, telling her to give up. A pistol banged flatly; Eleanor turned back to the seneschal and her mount stumbled, pitching her headlong. She rolled, covering her face as she had once been taught, rose tousled but unharmed. Beside her the horse lay screaming, blood dribbling brightly from a foreleg.

She ran to it, eyes wide. The seneschal had wheeled behind her; he dismounted and thrust his reins into her hand. "My Lady . . . *ride for Wareham*. . . ."

She shook her head dazedly, trying to think. "He's blown, there isn't a chance. They'd take me on the road. . . ." The horsemen were close; the seneschal raised a

pistol, steadied the barrel on his forearm and squeezed the trigger. By the merest accident the ball took one of the riders in the chest, fetching him from his horse; the line wheeled, momentarily confused.

A whistling sounded. Eleanor turned, fists clenched. Behind her, distant on the rutted strip of road, a heavy steamer laboured with a train of waggons. She began to run toward it, feeling the air scythe into her lungs. A pistol exploded again; this time she heard the ball cut through the grass twenty yards to her right. Another shot; she snatched a backward glance, saw the seneschal ridden down by a mounted man. Then her feet were stumbling along the road, and the engine was very close.

She stopped by it, leaning on the great rear wheel and panting, seeing the oldness of the steamer, the canopy pierced through with holes, the rust streaks and the bubbling of water from ancient boiler joints. A great worn-out wreck she was, ending her days hauling wood and manure and stone, but still liveried in the dark maroon of Strange and Sons. Her driver was a fair-haired boy in the corduroys and buckled cap of a haulier, greasy muffler knotted his neck. Eleanor gulped, and thrust her hand up so he could see the ring she wore. "Tell me quickly," she panted. "Where is your home?"

"Durnovaria, Lady. . . ."

"Then you are my liege-man," she gasped. "Fight this treachery. . . ."

He answered something, startled; she didn't hear the words. His hands went to regulator and brake, she heard the sudden overworked thunder of the engine. She flung herself away; a hot drizzle lashed her face, smoke stung her lungs and the train was past, gathering speed down the road, the loco half hidden by steam as the driver used his whistle over and again.

What followed was confused. The horses, bunched, were scattered by the iron shrieking; the haulier spun his wheel, turning the engine onto the rough. Three of the waggons broke clear; the others, loaded high and bound with tarpaulin, swayed behind the steamer as she bounced toward Sir Anthony. He bellowed with rage, whirling a sword; a charger bucked, throwing a soldier over its neck; the chest of another man was crushed by cascading blocks

of stone. A rider raised a pistol, firing blind ; the ball struck the hornplate of the loco, throwing hot splinters into her driver's face. He flung up his hands and a second shot took him in the armpit, bowling him from the footplate. The loco, regulator open, ploughed by Sir Anthony. Fifty yards on, one wheel struck a mound in the grass. She slewed, held back by her load ; a huge grinding, a hissing explosion of steam and she landed on her side, flywheel still churning, cinders from her firebox scattering across the grass. Flames licked up at once, showing brightly through the drifting smoke. She burned the rest of the day ; it was night before a peasant child crept close enough to the wreck to prise the naveplate from one mighty wheel. He kept it in his cottage, polished bright ; and half a lifetime later he would still tell his children the tale, and take the big disc down and fondle it, and say it came from a great road steamer called the *Lady Anne*. . . .

Escape was no longer possible ; Eleanor rose sullenly and let her wrists be pinioned at her sides. She saw the seneschal, arms similarly held, queer light eyes blazing with rage ; beside him two men supported the haulier. The boy was coughing, face masked bright with blood. Sir John's second shot had struck the tip of the Provost-Marshal's thumb, flicking back the nail till it stood at right angles from the flesh ; he was dancing and swearing, fussing with a handkerchief. "When slaves revolt," he fumed, "raising their hands against their masters, then there's no more but this. . . ." The haulier was pulled forward. Eleanor shrieked ; a falchion swung hissing to bite into his neck. The blow, badly delivered, didn't kill ; the boy scuttled to her, wetting her feet with blood while they cut at him in panic. It seemed an age before the thing was through ; the body flopped and leaped, subsided into stillness.

It was the first violent death the Lady Eleanor had ever seen ; and it had overtones of horror she was never likely to forget. She hung her head, trying not to faint, seeing the blood run glittering and soak into the dust. She didn't faint ; instead she began to vomit. The spasms became more violent ; she tore her arms from the men who held her, dropped to her knees and panted. When she had finished she raised a face that was blazing white to the

lips; and she began to swear. She swore in English and French, Celtic and Latin and Gaelic; she cursed Sir Anthony and his men, promising them a dozen different deaths in a flat, nearly gentle voice that seemed to hold the Provost-Marshall fascinated. He stopped bothering with his thumb, stood frowning; then he recollected himself, and bellowed for his men to fetch the riderless horses. The seneschal was forced to mount; a soldier swung Eleanor up in front of him and the party struck out past the crackling wreck of the steamer and across the heath, intending no doubt to rendezvous with some fishing boat that would take the captives out of reach of any pursuit. In those days there were men in Poole who would have ferried the King himself into bondage if the price was right.

Whatever scheme Sir Anthony had in mind was never put into effect. Somewhere across the heath the Signallers had seen, watching the distant fight through their great Zeiss lenses, and the pall of smoke from the burning train had been easily visible from Corfe. Signals flew, alerting not only the castle garrison but the militia of Wareham; the party was intercepted before it reached the sea. The Provost-Marshall checked when he saw he was cut off, and would have made great play of having Eleanor as a hostage had she not bitten the wrist of the man who held her and tumbled off a horse for the second time that day. She landed in a stand of gorse, rose scratched and bleeding and more furious than ever; the fight was over within minutes, and Sir Anthony and his people threw down their arms.

She limped to where they stood on the heath, surrounded by a ring of guns. Men ran to her but she pushed them away. She circled the prisoners slowly, rubbing her hip, picking unconsciously at the grass and twigs on her skirt; and it seemed the rage bubbled and boiled in her brain like the strange fumes of a wine. "Well, Sir Anthony," she said. "We made a little promise on the road. And here in the West, you'll find we keep our word. . . ." He tried to barter with her then, or beg his life; but she stared at him as if he spoke an unknown tongue. "Ask mercy of the wind," she said, almost wonderingly. "Beg to the rocks, or the great waves of the sea. Don't come and whine to

me. . . ." She turned aside to the seneschal. "Hang them," she said. "For treason, and for murder. . . ."

"*My Lady. . . .*"

She screamed at him suddenly, stamping on the ground. "*Hang them. . . .*" Beside her a soldier sat a restless horse ; she grabbed his jerkin and pulled, nearly tumbling him from the saddle. She was mounted and away before a hand could be raised, riding at breakneck speed across the heath, beating the neck of the animal with her fist. The seneschal followed her, leaving the prisoners to their fate. She reined a mile from the castle, dropped to the ground and ran to a knoll from where she could see her home spread out before her, the baileys and towers and the flanking hills clear in the bright air. She gripped the stirrup of the seneschal as he rode alongside, fingers twisting the stiff leather. If he'd hoped the wild ride would calm her he was disappointed. She was nearly too angry to speak ; the syllables jerked out from her like the cracking of sheets of glass. "Sir John," she said, "before our people came, and took this land with blood at Santlache Field, that place was called a Gate. Is that not true?"

He said heavily. "Yes, My Lady."

"Why then," she said, "let it be so again. Go to my people in the Great Plain, and north as far as Sarum Town. Go west to Durnovaria, and east to the village on the Bourne. Tell them. . . ." She choked, and steadied herself. "Tell them, they pay no tithes to Purbeck but in arms. Tell them that Gate is closed, and Eleanor holds the key. . . ." She tore at the seal on her finger. "Take my ring, and go. . . ."

He gripped her shoulder and turned her, staring into her wild eyes. "Lady," he said deliberately, "this is war. . . ."

She knocked his hand away, panting for breath. "*Will you go,*" she fumed, "*or shall I send another. . . .*" He said nothing else but touched heels to his horse and turned it ; galloped north, trailing dust, along the Wareham road. She mounted again and rode yelling into the valley, scattering the little chugging cars, sending them batwinging into the hedges ; and though her soldiers raked their horses bloody, none could match her speed.

Messages were despatched at once to Charles in Lon-

dinium, but all the semaphores brought back was the news that the King had already sailed for the Americas. Sir Anthony's stroke had been well timed; for though there were rumours the Guild could even get a message to the New World, by means no-one could guess at, there was no known way of contacting a ship at sea. Meanwhile the Provost-Marshall's supporters were rampaging round the capital threatening death, destruction and worse while Henry of Rye and Deal, under direct instructions from Rome, was hastily assembling his force. What Eleanor had predicted had to a large extent come true; all sorts of dogs were yapping in the absence of the King. The fact that the quarrel had originally come about as a result of what was now generally admitted to be an administrative error made the situation ever more ironic.

Her Ladyship faced many problems down in Dorset. She could levy men from the district round about, the commoners would flock to her banner soon enough; but a standing army must be fed and clothed and armed. For days the rage sustained her while she worked with her captains and housepeople drawing up the lists of what she would need. Money was clearly the first essential; and for that she rode north, to Durnovaria. What passed between her and her aged grandfather was never known; but for a solid week the crimson-dressed steamers toiled down to Corfe Gate, hauling in produce free. Flour and grain they brought and livestock, salted meat and preserves, shot and powder and wads and musketballs, rope and slowmatch, oil and kerosene and tar; chain hoists rumbled all night long, derricks powered by panting donkey engines swung load after load high into the keep. Eleanor had no idea what support might be forthcoming from the rest of the country and planned for the worst, packing her baileys with men and supplies. That was how Henry came to find the place so well prepared, and in such a lethal temper.

* * *

Eleanor called the seneschal to her room on the evening following the massacre. She was deadly pale, her eyes ringed with dark shadows; she waved him to a chair, sat awhile staring into the firelight and leaping shadows. "Well,

Sir John," she said finally, "I've been sitting here thinking up a glorious phrase for the . . . the thing that happened this morning. This is it. 'I've blown a Roman gadfly off my walls.' Don't you think that's very good?"

He didn't answer, and she laughed and coughed. "It doesn't help of course," she said. "All I can see still are those creatures in the ditch, and writhing on the path. Somehow beside that nothing else seems real. Not any more."

He waited again, knowing there was no help in words.

"I've expelled Father Sebastian," she said. "He told me there was no forgiving what I'd done, not if I walked barefoot to Rome itself. I told him he'd better leave, if there was no forgiveness he couldn't be a comfort and he was only putting himself in mortal sin by staying. I said I knew I was damned because I'd damned myself, I didn't have to wait for any god to do it for me. That was the worst of all of course; I only said it to hurt him but I realized afterwards I meant it anyhow, I just wasn't a Christian any more. I said if necessary I'd raise up a few old gods, Thunor and Wo-Tan perhaps or Balder instead of Christ; for he told me himself many years ago when I was still taking lessons at his knee that Balder was only an older form of Jesus and that there have been many bleeding gods." She poured wine for herself, unsteadily. "And then I spent the rest of the afternoon getting drunk. Or trying to. Aren't you disgusted?"

He shook his head. He'd never criticised her, not in all her life; and this wasn't the time to start.

She laughed again, and rubbed her face. "I need . . . something," she said. "Maybe punishment. If I ordered you to fetch a whip and beat me till I bled, would you do it?"

He shook his head, lips pursed.

"No," she said. "You wouldn't, would you. . . . Anything else, but you wouldn't have me hurt. I feel I want to . . . scream, or be sick, or something. Maybe both. John, when I'm excommunicated, what will our people do?"

He'd already considered his answer carefully. "Disavow Rome," he said. "It's gone too far now for anybody to turn back. You'll see that, My Lady."

"And the Pope?"

He thought again for a moment. "He'll certainly act," he said. "And that quickly ; but I can't see him ferrying an army all the way from Italy just to put down one strong-point. What he's almost bound to do is instruct his people in Londinium to march against us in force ; and I think too we'll be seeing some of the Seigneurs from the Loire and the Low Countries coming over to see what they can pick up in the confusion. They've been wanting to stake out a few claims on English soil for years enough now, and they'll certainly never get a better chance."

"I see," she said wearily. "What it comes down to is I've made a complete mess of things ; with Charles out of the way as well I've played right into their hands. They'll be flocking into England with the Church's full blessing, to put down armed revolt. What the end of that will be I just can't imagine." She got up and paced restlessly across the chamber and back. "It's no good," she said. "I just can't sit still and wait, not tonight." She sent for a writer, and the officers commanding her troops and artillery ; they worked into the small hours drawing up lists of the extra provisions they would need to withstand a full-scale siege. "There's no doubt," said Eleanor with a flash of her old practicality, "that we shall be bottled up for a considerable time ; till Charles gets back in fact. There won't be any question of chivalry either, of being let to walk out with our arms or anything like that, the whole thing's far too serious ; but at least we shall know by the time we're through who's actually running this country, ourselves or an Italian priest." She poured wine. "Well, gentlemen, let's hear your recommendations. You can have anything you need, arms, men, provisions ; I only ask one thing. Don't leave anything out. We can't afford to forget any details ; remember there's a rope, or worse, waiting for every one of us if we make a single slip. . . ."

The seneschal stayed with her after the others had gone, sitting drinking wine in the firelight and talking of all subjects from gods to kings ; of the land, its history and its people ; of Eleanor, and her family and upbringing. "You know," she said, "it's strange, Sir John ; but it seemed this morning when I fired the gun I was standing outside myself, just watching what my body did. As if I, and you, too, all of us, were just tiny puppets on the grass. Or on a

stage. Little mechanical things playing out parts we didn't understand." She stared into her wineglass, swilling it in her hands to see flamelight and lamplight dance from the goldenness inside; then she looked up frowning, eyes opaque and dark. "Do you know what I mean?"

He nodded, gravely. "Yes, My Lady. . . ."

"Yes," she said. "It's like a . . . dance somehow, a minuet or a pavane. Something stately and pointless, with all its steps set out. With a beginning, and an end. . . ." She tucked her legs under her, where she sat beside the fire. "Sir John," she said, "sometimes I think life's all a mass of significance, all sorts of strands and threads woven like a tapestry or a brocade. So if you pulled one out or broke it the pattern would alter right back through the cloth. Then I think . . . it's all totally pointless, it would make just as much sense backwards as forwards, effects leading to causes and those to more effects . . . maybe that's what will happen, when we get to the end of Time. The whole world will shoot undone like a spring, and wind itself back to the start. . . ." She rubbed her forehead tiredly. "I'm not making sense, am I? It's getting too late for me. . . ."

He took the wine from her, carefully. She stayed quiet awhile; when she spoke again she was half asleep. "Do you remember years ago telling me a story?" she asked. "About how my greatuncle Jesse broke his heart when my grandmother wouldn't marry him, and killed his friend, and how that was somehow the start of everything he did. . . . It seemed so real, I'm sure that was how it must have been. Well, I can finish it for you now. You can see the Cause and Effect right the whole way through. If we . . . won, it would be because of grandfather's money. And the money's there because of Jesse, and he did it because of the girl. . . . It's like Chinese boxes. There's always a smaller one inside, all the time; until they get so small they're too small to see but they keep on going down, and down. . . ."

He waited; but she didn't speak again.

For days the castle rang with activity; Eleanor's messengers rode out to scour the countryside around bringing in more men, provisions, meat on the hoof. The great lower bailey was prepared for the animals, pens and hurdles

lined against the outer walls. The steamers toiled once more bringing cattlecake and baled hay from Wareham, chugging down the road with trailers empty, clanking back through the outer gate to discharge their cargo in heaps on the flattened grass. Everything possible was shifted under cover; what stacks remained exposed were covered by tarpaulins, and turves and stone rubble strewn on top. The fodder would be a prime target were the enemy to bring fire machines with them. All day the hoists clattered and most of the night too, taking the provisions down to the cellars, bringing up quarrels for the crossbowmen, powder and ball for the arquebusiers, charges for the greatguns. The semaphores seldom stopped. The country was aflame; Londinium was arming, levies from Sussex and Kent were marching toward the West. Then came worse news. From France, from the castles of the Loire, men were streaming to fight in the Holy Crusade while to the south a second Armada was embarking for England. To Eleanor, John sent no word; but his intentions were plainer than speech. Her Ladyship redoubled her efforts. Steamers towing vast iron chains scythed the banks of the wet ditch; working parties fired the scrub from the castle *motte*, the bushes and trees that had seeded themselves there over the years; and down over the blackened grass went ton after ton of powdered chalk. The slopes would glow now in starlight, showing up the silhouettes of climbing men. Through it all the sightseers came, parking their little cars in the village square, flooding into the castle, through the gates and across the baileys, staring at the guns and the sentries on the walls, poking their noses into this, their prying fingers into that, impeding everybody nearly all the time. Eleanor could have closed her gates; but pride forbade her. Pride, and the counsel of the seneschal. Let the people see, he murmured. Invite their sympathy, appeal to their understanding. Her Ladyship would need all the support she could get from the country in the coming months.

On the thirtieth day after the massacre the seneschal rose and dressed at dawn. He walked down softly through the still-sleeping keep, through chambers and corridors let honeycomb-fashion into the huge walls, past arrowslits and fenestellas pouring livid grey light. Past a sentry, dozing at his post; the man jerked to attention, bringing his

halberd shaft ringing down onto stone. Sir John acknowledged the gesture, raising a hand thoughtfully, mind far away. Outside, in the raw air of the upper bailey, he paused. Round him the curtain walls loomed from the night, massive shadows topped by the tinier shadows of men; the breath of the guards showed in wisps above their heads. Far below huddled the roofs of the village, dim and blue, odd lights burning here and there; out on the heath a solitary glow showed him where some mason's boy trudged lantern in hand to work. He turned away, eyes seeing but not recording, mind locked inward. At this dawn hour it seemed as always that Time might pause, turning and flowing in on itself before speeding again, urging in the new day. The castle, like a great dim crown of stone, seemed to ride not a hill but a flaw in the time stream, a node of quiet from which possibilities might spread out limitless as the journeyings of the sun. No-one, not the seneschal and certainly no-one else, could have read his thoughts at that time. The old thoughts, the first thoughts of the first people ever; for the seneschal was of the ancient kind. . . .

At the tip of the second bailey the squat Butavant Tower jutted over the precipice of burned grass like a figurehead from the prow of a ship. The seneschal paused at the lower door, queer eyes on the horizon, swivelled slowly to face the Challow tower. And instantly, gracefully, the jointed arms began to flap.

He climbed the tower steps, feet shuffling on stone, hearing a drum behind him and a voice. A Page-Signaller scuttled across the bailey; something not more than a lad, hose wrinkled and tabard askew, message pad in hand, knuckling his eyes. Far out over the heath, in the cobalt intermingling of sea and sky, a light gleamed and was lost. Then another and another, and a patch of lighter dark that could have been a sail. As if a fleet had come to anchor, lay dressing its ranks and waiting.

At the top of the stair a locked door gave access to a tiny cell set in the thickness of the stone. To that door, the seneschal alone held a key. The key itself was strange, a little round-headed thing that carried instead of wards a wavy crest of brass. He inserted it in the lock, twisted; the door swung open. He left it ajar behind him; his hands

worked deftly, assembling the apparatus of magic the Popes in their wisdom had long since disallowed. Shapes of brass and shapes of mahogany tinkled and clattered ; a tiny spark flashed blue ; his name and questionings fled into an undiscovered Ether, invisible, silent, faster by a thousand times than the semaphores. He smiled quietly, took down paper and stylus and began to write. Footsteps clunked overhead ; a voice called urgently. He ignored it, lost to sensation, all his being focused on the thing that sparked and flashed between his fingers.

Behind him the door swung inward. He heard the intake of breath, the scrape of a shoe on stone ; he half turned, papers in his hands. Behind him the thing on the table clacked shrilly, untouched and unbidden. He smiled again, gently. "My Lady. . . ."

She was backing off staring, hand to her throat clutching the wrap she had flung across her shoulders. Her voice husked hollow in the shaft. "*Necromancy*. . . ."

He left the machine, pattered after her. "Eleanor. . . ." He caught her at the bottom of the stair. "Eleanor, I thought you had more wit. . . ." He took her wrist, drew her after him. She moved unwillingly, pulling back ; above her the device banged and tutted frantically. She edged round the door, lips parted, one hand flat against the stone, saw the little thing chattering devil-possessed. He started to laugh. "Here. It isn't good for your people to see." The door was closed behind her ; the lock shut with a snap. Her mouth trembled ; she couldn't take her eyes from what lay on the bench. "Sir John," she said falteringly, "*What is it*. . . ."

He shrugged impatiently, hands busy. "A manifestation of the electric fluid ; known to the Guild now for a generation."

She stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. She said wonderingly : "This is a language?" She drew nearer the bench, no longer afraid.

"Of a sort."

"*Who speaks it to you?*"

He said shortly : "The Guild of Signallers. But that is unimportant. My Lady, the semaphores will clack all day. This is what they will say ; *are saying* . . ."

Before he could finish a voice sounded over their heads ;

it came thickly through the stone, full of resonance and wonder.

"Caerphilly has taken arms. . . ."

She jerked sharply, staring up ; her mouth moved, but no sound came.

"And Pevensey," said the seneschal, reading. "And Beaumaris, Caerlon, Orford. . . . Bodiam has declared for the King, Caernarvon has burned its Charter. And Colchester, Warwick, Framlingham ; Bramber, Cardiff, Chepstow. . . ." She heard no more but ran to him, laughing and swinging her arms round his neck, waltzing round in the tiny space, upsetting wires and batteries and coils. And all day long the noise from the hill went on as the messages came lagging through on the old arms that were no longer of any use. All day till nightfall and far into the dark, spelling out the names in streaming arcs of flame ; the old places, the proud places, Dover and Harlech and Kenilworth, Ludlow, Walmer, York. . . . And from far out of the West, calling through the sea mist, the words that were like the tinkling of old armour ; Berry Pomeroy, Lostwithiel, Tintagel, Restormel ; while the lights crawled forward from the heath, and far out on the sea. At midnight the arms stopped working ; by next morning Corfe Gate was invested, and nothing moved on the semaphore towers but the swaying bodies of men.

The rising of the royal and baronial castles in every part of the country spared the defenders the main weight of the armada ; the armies pushed inland, moving hurriedly and by night, harried by Eleanor's artillery as they passed through the gap in the hills. Some five hundred men remained to lay siege to the castle. They brought with them or built on the spot a whole range of engines, ballistas, and mangonels ; and these with the three great trebuchets *Persuader*, *Faith of Rome* and *Direwolf* made play at the walls from the valley and surrounding hillsides. But so extreme was the range, and so great the elevation, that few of the missiles so much as cleared the outer curtain. Mostly they struck the stone below the battlements, bouncing back with hollow booms ; the odd shots that landed in the baileys were welcomed by Eleanor's men as additions to their own supplies. The machines set up by Her Ladyship had better sport, and with the greatguns caused such havoc that the

lines of the besiegers were soon withdrawn beyond the wet ditch. From there the Pope's men mounted attack after attack, varying their methods in the hope of taking the defenders by surprise; but they were invariably driven back. Mantlets were employed, each carried on the backs of a dozen men; sharpshooters blew off the legs of the wretches beneath, tumbling them and their engines back into the stream, leaving long swathes of redness on the flanks of the mound. An attempt at mining was watched with more sympathy than concern, while belfries could only be employed against the outer gate. One was constructed, out on the heath beyond long cannon shot; a heavy tower hung with wetted hides and with three storeys inside it for snipers. It made its approach one dawn, rumbling through the village street, propelled by a hundred sweating soldiers; but *Growler*, entrenched behind a triple line of sandbags, disembowelled it with a single shot, blowing men and parts of men into the great ditch to either side.

After that there was a lull in the fighting; and the besiegers hailed Eleanor, promising her the forgiveness of John (which wasn't theirs to offer) and asking her what she intended, if she thought she could war with the entire world. Then they sent a herald, with letters purporting to be from Charles, telling her the cause was lost and she must yield to Rome. Him she dismissed; though she offered, if he came again on such a bogus errand, to load him in the sling of a trebuchet and send him back by an airy and quicker route. There followed a greater bombardment than ever. All day long the stones roared in the air, while dust rose from the nearby quarries where roughmasons toiled to shape more rocks for the slings. Men charged the scarps, urged on by officers with primed muskets who offered to shoot waverers in the back. Eleanor taught a terrible lesson. The defenders withdrew, seemingly in confusion, from an entire section of the lower wall. The attackers, yelling like frightened fiends, ran for the Martyr's Gate, bunched there hammering and tearing at the bars of the portcullis. They realized their mistake too late to save themselves. The outer grating, hauled out of sight in the stone, slid down, imprisoning them like animals in a cage; and through the vents above their heads poured the scalding oil. Then the

besiegers, rendered more cautious, sat down in earnest to starve the castle out ; but when November came round, and Christmas and the New Year, the flags flew above the high keep, the oriflamme and the flowers and leopards of Eleanor's house. Still there was no word of the King ; neither thaumaturgy nor wireless telegraphy availed the seneschal now, the land was dumb. Then at last there was news, brought by a Sergeant of Signallers who worked his way through the enemy lines in the dusk, dying already from an arrow broken off short in his back. Beaumaris had fallen, and Caerlon, and the mighty Tower of Dubris had taken forty days before abandoning the fight.

Eleanor stayed up late that night, walking the tower rooms and the baileys, heaped now with the debris of the battle. To her came the seneschal, in the dim time before dawn when the torches burned amber and guttering, when the sentries nodded at their posts or started up alarmed at the whisperings of oiled silk windowpanes. The mist was rising on the Great Heath, and the moon eclipsed by cloud.

"Tell me, Sir John," she said, and her voice was lost and tiny, barely stirring the harsh air. "Come to the window here, and tell me what you see. . . ."

He stood silent a long time. Then, heavily, "I see the night mists moving on the hills, and the watch fires of our enemies. . . ." He made to leave her ; but she called him sharply.

"Fairy. . . ."

He paused, back turned to her ; and as he stood she used his proper name, the sound by which he was known among the Old Ones. "I told you once," she said acidly, "when I required the truth, then you would know. Now I charge you. Come to me again, and tell me what you see."

She stood close while he thought, head in hand ; he could feel the warmth of her in the night, scent the faint presence of her body. "I see an end to everything we know," he said at last. "The Great Gate broken, John's banners on the walls."

She pursued him. "And me, Sir John? What for me?"

He didn't immediately answer and she swallowed, feeling the night encroach, the dark slide into her body. "Is there death?" she said.

"My Lady," he said gently, "there is death for everyone. . . ."

She threw her head back then and laughed, as she had laughed once before in the face of Rye and Deal. "Why then," she said, "we must live a little while we can. . . ." And that morning they sallied before it was light, fifty strong, and burned *Direwolf*; his bones still lie there on the hill. And the long gun *Prince of Peace* broke the arms of his fellows, arms so stout and long there was no wood to replace them. So they brought the greatgun *Holy Meg*, and she and the culverin talked to each other across the valley till the smoke rolled back between the hills like steam from a boiling pot.

* * *

The minstrel was quiet a long time, sitting with his head bowed and the wind moving in his hair. I broke the silence first. "But all her efforts were of very little use," I said, and waved my hand at the ruins crumbled round the hill. "John still had his way; the Gate was broken, just as the prophecy had said."

He shook his head thoughtfully. "John didn't have his way. Rome didn't break that place; it was our own King Charles, the King that people called The Good."

I was silent, waiting to see which way he would develop his argument. "It was an accurate description," he said finally. "Because in the long run he thought first of his people. He couldn't fight the rest of the world; the question they asked Eleanor, he answered for himself."

I felt we were back on more familiar ground. "Yes," I said, "after the Battle of London and the reverses at Boston and Wensleydale there wasn't much else for him to do. But I'm still not too satisfied; for the history books tell us, and my professor was most insistent, that the castles fought the King, after he himself had bowed the knee to Rome."

"That's true of course," he said, stroking the golden grass with his tanned, grass-coloured fingers. "Harlech, Nottingham, Restormel; they were all reduced by the Royal forces after the signing of the treaty with Pope John. That was inevitable of course; after all the rebels knew they stood to lose at best their lands and living and at worst their lives. It was an unpleasant time; but Charles

had to show he was still King in his own country. He could see farther than they could and deeper, despite the allegations they levelled at him, calling him coward and turncoat from their very walls." He lifted his head, and his eyes looked past me into distance. "But," he said with a sort of curious pride, "the Great Gate wasn't one of them. Eleanor had known from the start the thing was hopeless; she held for her King, and that was all. . . ."

* * *

They heard of his coming, from the telegraphs. It was a fine summer day when he crossed with his retinue into Purbeck Isle. They were still closely invested; in fact the besiegers had launched a heavy attack, their first for many months, and in the confusion he arrived almost unheralded. The first they knew was when the guns in the valley fell silent. A strange silence it was too, a breathing hush in which one could hear the wind sighing across the heath-land. They saw his banners in the village, his horses and the siege train winding across the heath, and the seneschal hurried to find his mistress. She was in the second bailey; they had the culverin mounted beside the Butavant Tower and were playing him at the men trying to climb the slope below. Eleanor was dirty with smoke and a little bloody, for one of her people had been hurt by the fire from an arquebus and she had helped bind the wound. She straightened when she saw the seneschal, his grave face and bearing. He nodded quietly, confirming what she had already seen in his face. "My Lady," he said simply. "Your King is here. . . ."

She had no time to change or make any preparations, for the Royal party was already in sight of the lower ward. She ran on her own, down across the sloping bailey to the gate, the seneschal pacing a distance behind. Nobody else moved, not the gunners, not the bowmen and snipers lining the walls. She stopped by *Growler*, still standing where he had stood from the first, and leaned on his barrel. Before her were the tossing banners and the armour, the horses champing their bits and dancing from the smell of powder, the waiting soldiers with their guns and swords.

He rode forward alone, disdaining protection. He saw the gatehouse towers, stained now by smoke and scarred by shot, the portcullis sunk into the ground where it had

fallen over a year before and not moved since. He stared a long time at Eleanor, standing fists clenched by the gun; then he reached forward, rattled his whip against the bars in front of him and gestured once with the stock of it.

Up. . . .

She waited, the hair blowing round her face; then she nodded tight-lipped to the people above. A pause; and the chains creaked, the counterweights swung in their carved channels. The gate groaned and lifted, tearing aside the rank grass that had seeded round its foot. He rode forward, ducking his head beneath the iron as it climbed up into the stone; they heard the hooves of his horse on the hard ground inside. He dismounted, going to Eleanor; and only then did the cheering spread, through the village and the soldiers and the ranks of people on the walls, up and away to the tower of the Great Keep. So the place yielded, to its liege-lord and to no other. . . .

* * *

"Well," I said after a pause, "I still can't help feeling she had a very bad deal. After all, Charles sent the guns she used so effectively; he could have supported her a little better than that. And we lost all these old places of ours virtually for nothing. After the Revolt was squashed John simply tightened his grip on the land; it was years before we finally broke away."

The strange man smiled, and shook his head. "The castles, and Eleanor, freed England," he said. "If freedom is the proper word to use. The uprisings that started all over the Western world had their seeds in that time of the Revolt. Within twenty years the American colonies had broken free and Australasia, the Netherlands and most of Scandinavia; and Charles took his chance, with the Pope locked in the final struggle with Germany, to secede from the Church, a thing that should have happened centuries before."

"There wasn't any sacrifice. What did we lose? A few old stones, anachronisms waiting for death. . . . We didn't need them; with steam power and internal combustion, and electricity waiting to be used, what good were baileys and curtain walls? Within a decade of those walls break-

ing our first planes flew ; fifty years, and we had atomic energy. All this had been held back from us by Rome."

I nodded. "The Church certainly deserved to fall. She might have begun in goodness, but she had turned to evil."

He lifted his head and laughed. "Evil?" he said. "Evil?" Then he took from round his neck a medallion, and I saw on it the same crossing lines that appeared on the castle and the grave. "Read an ancient mystery," he said, chuckling. "See the thing that appalled the Church a thousand years before Eleanor was born. . . ."

But I was tired of mysteries. "I'm not interested in the toys of necromancy," I said firmly. "That thing's a taradiddle, and well you know it."

"Yes," he said, stroking the medallion thoughtfully. "A toy of a sort maybe." He turned the disc to me, covering the lower half of the design with his hand. "See," he said, "two arrows. And again. . . ." He moved his fingers, concealing the upper part of the circle. "Two more."

I frowned. "Two arrows point outward ; two point in, toward each other. So there is some meaning in the scrawl. What's it supposed to infer?"

"Progress," he said, tucking the charm away. "This the Old Ones knew, when they carved it centuries ago. After fission, fusion ; this was the progress the Popes fought so hard to halt."

"The ways of the Church were mysterious, her policies never plain. The Popes knew, as the Old Ones knew, that given electricity we would be drawn to the atom. Given fission, we would come to fusion. Because once, beyond our Time, there was a great civilisation. There was a Coming, a Death and Resurrection ; a Conquest, a Reformation, an Armada . . . and a burning, an Armageddon. The Church knew there was no halting progress ; but slowing it, giving us time to reach a little higher toward Reason . . . that was the gift she tried to give the world. And it would have been priceless."

He smiled gently. "Where do you think the scientists came from?" he asked. "And the doctors, thinkers, philosophers? How could we possibly have climbed from feudalism to democracy in a generation, if Rome hadn't flooded the West with her proscribed wealth of knowledge? When she saw her empire crumbling, when she knew

world domination had ended, she gave us back what we thought she'd stolen, the knowledge she was keeping for us in trust. Against the day when we could use it well. Evil? If it hadn't been for Rome, we might have stood on the moon a century ago. Or we might all have been destroyed again. Now, we wait. As the Church waits; for most certainly her time will come again. . . ."

I sat frowning; my imagination refused to grasp at one attempt the ideas he had put before me. The notion of a repeating cycle, and endlessness of destruction and creation broken at last by what the Church had done, was altogether too big for me. But were it true, if the Popes had really achieved such a miracle as he suggested, then . . . it seemed I would have to return in all seriousness to my books. There was much I had never understood, and much I wished to learn, about this Church. . . .

To hide my confusion, I pointed to the grave again. "Well," I said, "you've certainly got some unusual ideas, I'll grant you that; and you told a good story very well indeed. So well in fact that I should feel cheated not to hear the end. What finally happened to Eleanor? Is this her grave, or were you joking when you told me that?"

He shook his head. "That's her monument certainly, poor though it might be. As to what happened to her; she was imprisoned, by the King's order, in the White Tower. She lay there ten years; not badly circumstanced, if what I've heard is true, but pining by the day and by the week for her Dorset valleys and the Purbeck heath. In the meantime of course her home was destroyed, along with the rest of our strongpoints, by Charles' instruction, to satisfy Pope John. That was our price for warring Holy Rome."

"The King couldn't show his gratitude, even though there was no doubt he was grateful to her and all the rest. If he'd continued to fight he would have been deposed; and then it would have gone the worse for England. Eleanor got from him an open door, the sleepiness of a sentry; a horse at the postern, these things can be arranged. A decade later, when John was dead and half forgotten, she fled back to what had been her home. She could have left the country, money was provided; but she chose not to. Life for her was life in the West, on the hills where she had been born."

"And what about her seneschal?" I asked. "I've gathered through your story he was more than a little attracted to her ; did she ever see him again?"

He nodded. "He found her, alone of all her people. She had taken the dress and the patterned nylons of a serving-wench, but he knew her for his mistress. He the Fairy. . . ."

I laughed, pleased at so charming an ending to the legend. "Why then," I said, "I suppose he had his way with her. When she was no longer a great lady there would have been no barrier of rank."

He clenched his hands at that, and looked so queer and black I reached for the gun at my belt again ; but the mood was past in an instant. "He served her till she died," he said quietly. "She was the Lady Eleanor, and he her seneschal. . . ." Another wait ; then, "you shall hear her end," he said. "For you've listened to the rest with patience. . . ."

* * *

On a dismal October day many years after the last of the castles had rumbled down in ruins, two men walked quietly through the streets of a little West Country town. There was something both urgent and secretive in their movements ; they strode quickly, glancing round from time to time as if to make sure that they were not observed. They turned under the covered archway of an inn and crossed the yard. Beneath the arch strands of dead creeper swayed ; a scatter of rain, driven on a gust of wind, pattered across the cobbles. The strangers tapped at a door, were admitted ; the door was fastened behind them with the rattle of chains. Beyond was a passageway, almost pitch dark in what was left of the afternoon light, and a flight of stairs. They climbed silently. There was a landing, a door at the end ; they stopped in front of it and knocked, softly at first then more imperiously.

The woman who opened to them held a wrap loosely across her throat her hair, still long, coiled brownly round her shoulders. ; "John," she said, "I didn't expect . . ." She stopped, staring ; and her hand slowly tightened on the scarf. She swallowed, closed her eyes ; then, "Who do you

seek?" She asked the question flatly, as if drained of all emotion.

The taller of the visitors answered quietly. "The Lady Eleanor. . . ."

"There's no such person," she said. "Not here. . . ." She made as if to close the door; but they pushed her aside, edging into the room. She made no further move to stop them; instead she turned and walked to the one small window, stood with her head down and her hands gripping the back of a chair. "How did you find me?" she said.

There was no answer; and she turned to face them where they stood with feet apart on the bare boards of the room. A long pause; then she tried to laugh. The sound came out choked, like a little cough. "Have you come to arrest me?" she said. "After all this time?"

The tall man shook his head sombrely. "M'Lady," he said, "we have no warrant. . . ."

Another wait, while the wind skirled round the eaves of the building, flung a salvo of rainspots at the windowpanes. She shivered, touching her throat again. "It's been a long time," she said. "Such a very long time. I'd almost thought . . . but that doesn't matter now, does it?" She crossed the room, stood with her back turned to them. They heard liquid splash into a glass, the little sound as the rim chattered against her teeth. "I'm behaving better than I thought I would," she said, "but not as well as I hoped. It's a terrible thing, this being afraid. Like an illness. Like wanting to fall down, and not being able to faint. You never get used to it you see. You live with it and live with it and each day it gets worse; and one day it's the worst of all. I thought, when it . . . happened, I wouldn't be afraid. But I was wrong. . . ."

She went to the window again. The stranger moved forward; but softly, so the old boards didn't creak. She stood looking down into the inn yard, and he could see her shaking. "I never thought," she said, "that it would be raining. It's the details like that you can't ever imagine. I didn't want it to be raining. . . ."

She set the glass down carefully. "One never believes in Last Great Thoughts," she said. "But it seems at the end one's able to see so very clearly. I'm remembering now how many times I've prayed for death. When I've been

lonely, and frightened, in the night . . . I've really done that, prayed for it. . . . But now I can see what a wonderful thing life is. How every breath is . . . precious."

The man at the door moved impatiently ; but the other raised his hand. Eleanor half turned, showing them the sheen of tears on her cheek. "I don't suppose," she said, "it's any use begging you not to . . . do what you've come to do. You see, I'm so very weak. I swore never to plead, not even if I got the chance ; but I'm doing it just the same. . . ." She drew a slow, ragged breath, hoping unwillingly for the sound of a foot on the stair. "I won't go on my knees though," she said, "or offer you my body. I've got enough sense left not to do that. . . ."

She turned back to the window. "I'm trying to convince myself I've had a good life," she said. "Better than I ever deserved. I've known love ; it was very rich and strange. And there was a time once when I owned all the land I could see. I could go to my . . . high tower and look out to the hills and far off to the sea and it was all mine, every yard of it. Every blade of grass. . . . And I had horses and dogs and birds, and serving-people and soldiers . . . they'd all come running when I called, and do what they were told. And some of them maybe even loved me a little. . . . I'd like to see them all again now, only I know I can't. I'd like to know where they all are ; scattered, and dead, and blown away by the wind. . . . I'd like to feel the wind, just once again. . . ."

"M'Lady," said the stranger gruffly. "This is far from our will. . . ." He moved his hand slightly, felt the thin-bladed knife slide down into the palm.

John Faulkner climbed the stairs slowly, set down the basket he carried outside his mistress's door. Tapped quietly, then again ; waited, starting to frown. Eased lightly at the catch, and pushed the door ajar. At first he didn't see her, sitting in the high-backed chair ; then his eyes dilated. He ran forward, tried to take her hands. She kept them pressed to her side ; and he saw the blood-marks on the floor, the trail where she had dragged herself along. She turned her head listlessly, her face a white paper mask. "This too," she whispered. "This too, from Charles. . . ."

She lifted her hands then, showed him in the gloom the brightness of the palms.

He stayed kneeling, breath hissing between his teeth; and when he lifted his head his face was totally changed. "Who did this, Lady?" he asked her huskily. "When next they cross the Heath, then we must know. . . ."

She saw the blazing at the backs of the strange eyes and reached for his wrist, slowly and with pain. "No, John," she said. "The Old Ways are dead. Vengeance is . . . mine, saith the Lord. . . ." She grimaced, curling her lips; blood showed between her teeth. He tried to lift her, but she resisted him. "Get me a . . . horse," she said. "A horse. . . . Quickly John, please. . . ." He stood a moment longer staring down, face twisted as if with pain; then he ran to do her bidding.

The two horses moved slowly, in the first chill light of dawn. Round them the wind yapped and shrilled, plucking at the cloaks of their riders. Eleanor sat hunched, frozen with pain; it was the seneschal who reached across to rein her mount. He swung to the ground, supporting her as she leaned in the saddle. Before her, seeming miles off in the iron-grey light, loomed the two flanking hills; and between them, where once had stood a Hall, the bosses and nubs of stone, the teeth and shattered pinnacles and fingers thrust into the sky. Round them the rainsqualls moved and the cloud, obscuring; and over all, ragged and stiff and robbed of colour, flapped the remnants of great flags. Flags of cobalt, and of gold. . . .

She sighed, a long, agonised sound; and her fingers gripped his shoulder, squeezing at the flesh. "There," she said faintly. "There, see. . . . The Great Gate was broken; you told me, but I wouldn't hear. . . ." She stared round her dully, at the half-seen vastness of the heath. "Everything . . . changing," she said. "For better, or for ill. . . ." She coughed, rackingly, and pressed the back of a hand against her mouth. "I loved it," she said. "All . . . old things, that had gone on for ever. But it was me that . . . broke it. I was the start. . . ."

He picked her gently from the horse, wiped at the blood that had run and dried on neck and chin. He held her in his arms, stroking her forehead and her wet hair. "I always

hoped," she said, "at the end I would be tired. I'm very . . . tired . . . now. . . ." She only spoke once more; and then the words ran and blended together, losing coherence. "Old One," she whispered. "You who . . . served my father so well, and me. . . . Make my signs the rose . . . and the hawk. The flower to sink its roots into our soil, the bird to . . . taste . . . the wind. . . ." He bowed his head, accepting the charge. The horses champed their bits and cropped the grass, the wind soughed on the heath; he held her a long time, long after she had gasped again and stiffened, and was dead.

* * *

The minstrel fell silent once more; and I own I was deeply disturbed by the strange things I had heard. To hide my confusion I began to part the grasses by the grave, there in that sunny place under the warm sky. I came on the Sign again, stamped over and over in the stone, and the symbols of Eleanor's house, the leopards passant and the Flower of Lys; and I was startled too, for as I touched the grass some bird burst from it and rushed into the sky, was lost in the brightness of the zenith before I could properly make out its shape or size. Also I saw, coiled round and round the stone, what I had not noticed before, sprays and leaves of briar. I drew back startled, then collected myself; for necromancy died with the breaking of the Old Church, ours is the Age of Reason.

I made to speak to the storyteller, but could not. It seemed some heaviness had touched my limbs, so that though I heard the monorail call and the voices from the village street I could neither speak nor move. And he himself seemed vague, as though seen across a great space of air; though that was absurd, for he sat so close I could have touched the hem of his cloak with my hand. Also the stones on the hill glowed suddenly above his head, but no longer ragged; they shone white and proud and four-square against the blue. In time the fantasy vanished; and then I think I dozed. I must have dozed; *for how may a man turn to a golden glamour, and melt into a restless sea of glass, unless one sleeps and dreams?*

— KEITH ROBERTS

THE OH IN JOSE*

by Brian W. Aldiss

They had seen no human habitation for two days when they came unexpectedly on a mountain village. Here their servant arranged that an old woman should guide them over the mountains and back to civilization.

After spending an uncomfortable night in the village, they were off early next morning, the five of them: the old woman on foot, the servant on a mule leading a pack mule, and the three men on horses. Of the men, one was by some years the oldest, a spare man with a trim white beard and somewhat over-meticulous gestures. The two younger men were of contrasting type; one of them, the *bon viveur*, was a thick-set man in his forties, with a plump face and an intelligent glance not entirely marred by a snub nose. His humorous manner acted as a foil for the more serious ways of the youngest man, who was a philatelist of some repute, although only among other philatelists.

Each of the men was pleased with the excellent company afforded by his two fellows. They had established among themselves a combination of seriousness and gaiety, of reserve and intimacy, which is rare and which more than compensated for the arduous of their long and difficult journey. Where the road would allow it, they spent much of each morning, before the sun was too hot, conversing as they rode; and these conversations were often protracted after dusk, while the servant prepared and they ate their supper.

But now, as the old woman led them higher into the hills, and as the scene became more desolate, the elder fell silent. The *bon viveur* was delivering a long mock-heroic about why people told stories of what their dentists did, but finally he too lapsed into silence. All that morning, they rode in a quiet broken only by the echoes of the horses' movements among the canyons they traversed, or by an occasional word from the servant to his mules.

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The *bon viveur* secretly resented this silence that he felt radiated from the elder and rebuked him inwardly for not thrusting off a fit of old man's melancholy. His feeling was that they were three intelligent men whose inward resources should be proof against transitory outside influences. So when they stopped at midday to take the cold meat, wine, and coffee that the servant set before them, the *bon viveur* said to the philatelist in a provoking tone, "Our old guide woman is more silent and dismal even than we are. We've not had a word out of her, or out of us."

"She has more right to be taciturn than we have," the philatelist said with a laugh. "Think what awaits us over the mountains: hot baths, music, elevators to whisk us to choice restaurants, libraries, conversation, the company of fair women! What awaits her? Only that dreadful village again, and work till her life's end." Addressing himself to the old woman in her own tongue, he called, "Hey, my charming madam, you only left your home at dawn today! Are you pining already for some vagabond of a husband?"

The old woman had come barefoot from the village with seemingly no provision for the three- or four-day journey but a loaf tucked under her shawl. She sat now away from them, awaiting the order to move on again, and did not look up or answer when the philatelist spoke.

"You'll have to find something else to distract yourself with," the elder said, not approving this baiting of an old woman.

As they got up to go, and were mounting their horses, the servant came over and told the *bon viveur* and the philatelist, rather shame-facedly, that he had heard in the village that the old woman was once a great beauty who had suffered a great love and a great betrayal.

The *bon viveur* laughed and nudged his friend in the ribs. "All these old crones claim to have been great beauties," he said. "We shall indeed have to find something else to distract ourselves with."

Although the elder smarted a little at this remark, which he felt to be directed against him, he said nothing, and they rode on; but as it happened it was only a half hour later that they found something to distract them back into their old companionable humour.

They worked their way through a defile, the end of which

was marked by one wretched tree clinging to the rockface, and were suddenly on a plateau. To one side lay mountain peaks, ribbed with snow and half-hidden under fuming cloud, while to the other lay an immense panorama of the land they had so painfully traversed, all the way to the distant sea, now hidden in the hazes of noon. With a common instinct, the three men turned aside from the way the woman led and directed their mounts towards the precipice.

For a long while they stood drinking in this view of the distant world of grass and shade and fertility, so different from the place in which they now stood. At last the elder said, "Well, I still say there is nothing more melancholy than a mountain, but it was worth the journey just to look down at this spectacle. Sometime, I would like to have you gentlemen's opinions on why a view from a height has such power to move the spirit."

"Come and look at this!" exclaimed the philatelist. Something in his voice made the others turn immediately to see what he had found.

Perched a few feet away from them, on the very lip of the plateau, so that its outer edge hung into space, was a giant rock. It was grey in colour, and most of its surface had been worn smooth by the elements. But what drew the attention of the men was a human addition to the rock. Someone had carved here in its centre, and in large letters, the name JOSE.

"Well, that's a disappointment, I must say," the *bon viveur* remarked humorously. "Just when I was thinking we were the first people ever to set foot in this remote spot."

"I wonder who Jose was, and why he carved his name here of all places," the elder said. "And when. And a dozen other questions connected with the mysterious Jose."

"Perhaps he carved this as his memorial and then jumped over the edge," suggested the *bon viveur*. "I can think of few more dramatic spots in which to commit suicide, if one were so inclined."

"I've an idea," said the philatelist. "Here we have a little mystery at our very feet. Let's each tell a story about this Jose. Obviously, it is beyond our power to arrive at the truth about him, so let's each arrive at a fiction about him."

"Good idea," said the *bon viveur*, "though I have run out of bright ideas. The oldest among us must tell his Jose story first."

"Seconded," agreed the philatelist and, turning to the elder man, asked him to think of a story.

The elder stroked his beard a little and protested that he was being given the hardest task in beginning; but he was a resourceful old man and, setting one foot on the carved rock, he stared into space and began his story.

"I am not at all sure," he said, "that this name was not written here by supernatural means, for this plainly is a supernatural place. If I have doubts, it is because Jose is hardly a supernatural name. Of all names it is the most earthy; all round the world, you can find peasants called Jose or Joe or Joze or some close local equivalent. Of all names, it is the most impersonal, the name of a force rather than a man. You know, in the first human tribe, all the males were probably called Jose.

"Consider the letters that form the name. Look at this three-fingered E! It reminds one, doesn't it, of a crude agricultural implement, a rake that every peasant uses to rake the detritus of each season wearily from his land. And the J! Isn't that another implement, the first, the curving sickle that must cut down the weeds and the choking grass from the land? What about this awkward S he has made in the rock, of all the letters the most difficult to cut? Is it not the slow meandering path taken by his beast, along the shores of a lake, or winding over a mountain track? And look at the O in JOSE! What a symbol you have there, my friends—a symbol of the earth itself, which Jose will inherit, and of fertility, which is as much the concern of the Joses of our world as it is of the earthworm. You see what Jose means; it is a natural force like the rock on which it is written.

"But this particular inscription has something individual about it, I fancy. You notice how the J is bitten deep, but the other letters are formed more shallowly. The E is too small. It all goes to show that this Jose lacked assurance. You may wonder why, and I will tell you.

"This Jose was a quiet boy, not particularly clever, not particularly dull, not particularly brave, not particularly anything. But one day when he was going on the way to

his father's house, he was stopped in the lane by four bigger boys. Jose did not know these boys, and we can imagine that directly he saw them he could tell from their looks that there was trouble coming. Perhaps he tried to run from them, but they caught him and made him stand before them.

"'What is your name?' they demanded.

"'Jose.'

"'Okay, Jose—explain yourself.'

"He tried to evade the question, indeed he tried to evade them, but always they grabbed him by the collar and said, 'Explain yourself.'

"'I was born in the village,' he said pathetically at last.

"'Why were you born, boy? Explain yourself.'

"No answer he could give seemed to satisfy them. Moreover, the answers were not satisfactory even to Jose himself. When finally he escaped, their question worried him even more than his fresh bruises. Explain himself? He was totally unable to do so! Now it would be foolish of me to claim, even as an omniscient storyteller with the power of life and death over my character, that Jose never forgot that searching demand to explain himself. But let us say that it would come back to him at odd and sometimes inconvenient moments in his life, to puzzle and worry him: when he was making merry with his friends, when he was flirting with a village girl, or perhaps when one of them jilted him; or when he was in church, or ill, or taking a holiday, or swimming in the river, or lying lazily in his marriage bed, or cradling his firstborn, or sweating in the noonday field, or even squatting in the flimsy W.C. at the bottom of his patch of land. What I mean to say is, that at various moments throughout Jose's life, the good ones or the bad, he would suddenly feel that a big question hung over him, that there was something about him that needed explaining, something that he was quite unable to explain.

"He kept this thing secret, even from his wife whom he loved. He told himself it was not important, and you two gentlemen may like to judge if he was correct in so thinking. But not to let my story grow too long, for I grant you that stories about simple peasants can become very long indeed, Jose's wife died one day. He was full of grief, so much so that he persuaded his old mother to look after his

son for a week while he himself saddled up the donkey and rode off into the hills to be alone with his melancholy. It's not my job to tell you why people have such an instinct, for to me hills are melancholy places in their own right, and more likely to induce than cure gloom. Still, for the purpose of my story, we have to have Jose riding into the hills—these hills, you know. The assumption will stand since it is not contrary to human nature.

"In the hills, Jose let the mule—no, we said donkey, didn't we?—he let the animal go where it would while he thought about his life and the meaning of life. But when it came to the meaning of life, he could no more explain himself than when he was a lad being bullied in the lane. In the depths of his brooding, he sat where we stand now, and he carved his name in this rock. And we three are not privileged to know whether Jose had the wit to see that his name was his explanation, and that he himself was self-explanatory."

This story was much appreciated by the *bon viveur* and the philatelist.

"I shall make a poor showing after that fine and philosophical story unless I have a drop of wine first," said the *bon viveur*. He motioned to the servant, who now stood respectfully behind them, holding the horses. The old guide woman remained beyond the group, dissociating herself from them. When the servant came forward with a bag of wine and the *bon viveur* had slaked his throat, he said apologetically, "Well, here is my story of Jose, though I'm afraid I'm going to have to move this hulking boulder over to another site for the purposes of the narrative."

"It is the privilege of fiction to move mountains," observed the philatelist, and with that encouragement, the *bon viveur* began his tale.

"With a certain amount of diligence, it was possible to grow very good vines in Jose's field. His field lay at the foot of a mountain next to a lake, so that it was sheltered and it was not too arduous to get water to moisten the roots of the vines.

"Jose was cross-eyed. He had other and more serious troubles also. The field was small, and would barely support him and his pigs and his donkey. Then there were the changes of government, and the changes of forms of

government ; and although each form of government proclaimed itself more interested in Jose's welfare than the last, each one seemed to require Jose to work harder than the last.

"There was also the rock. The rock was shaped like an elephant's foot and had fallen away from the mountain in some forgotten time, perhaps even before there were men to forget, or indeed elephants to have feet. The rock occupied a lot of Jose's land where he might more profitably have grown vines. But he never resented it. On his twenty-first birthday he carved his name on it, and every day of his working life he rested his back against it.

"For all his troubles, Jose married a good girl from the nearby town and was happy with her. She possessed the sound sense to love him for his crossed eye and to smell sweet even when she sweated from labouring in the field with him. He planted his vines closer to the mountain and worked harder than before, in order to support her and the government.

"A son was born to Jose. Jose rejoiced, and planted his vines closer to the lake. A second son was born, and the vines were planted closer to the big rock. In due season, the next year to be precise, a third son was born. After the rejoicing was done, Jose planted his vines closer together. And he worked a little harder, and got a little drunk when he thought he worked too hard.

"The years came and went as fast as governments, and the sons grew up tall and scraggy because there was not overmuch to eat. The eldest son drifted into town and became full of the theories of the current régime. He came back to see his father wearing a steel-grey suit and said: 'Father, you are a reactionary and obtuse old fool of a goat, if you will pardon my saying so. If you let the government buy your land for a reasonable pittance, you could go on working on it and they would come with dynamite and blast that elephant's foot out of the way, so that you could grow many more vines than you do—increase production, as we call it in the city.' He even got a man to photograph the rock with a foreign-made camera, but Jose was not to be moved.

"The government fell, and the first son was shot for his ideas. The second son joined the army. One day, he came

back to see his father dressed in a captain's uniform and said, 'So, Dad, you antiquated old numbskull, I see you are still toiling your life out round the elephant's foot! Did you never learn what graft was when you were young? The army are going to build a new road a couple of kilometres from here. Give me the word and I'll send them the rock to build the road with, and they can haul it away with bulldozers.' He even got a sergeant to survey and photograph the rock, but Jose was no more to be moved than his rock.

"There was a revolution, and the second son was shot for the good of the country. The youngest son grew up very crafty, perhaps because he had starved the most, and went into banking. He saw what little effect his brothers' words had had on his father, and addressed the old man thus, 'My dear and hard-working old paternal pot, my informed friends in the city tell me there is every reason to suspect that there may be a great well of oil under the elephant's foot. You could be rich beyond the dreams of avarice and buy mother two new frocks if that were so. Why do you not look? If you and mother broke down a barrow-load of rock each day and flung it into the lake, at the end of two years or maybe less or maybe more, you would have the land clear. I can get you a barrow wholesale if you agree.' He even induced a fellow banker to take a colour photograph of the rock, but Jose was not to be moved.

"The next day, the president of the country absconded with all the gold from the bank, and the government fell. But Jose's wife sent the three photographs of the rock that looked so like an elephant's foot to a big magazine, whereupon it became a great tourist attraction at twenty-five cents a time, and Jose never had to grow vines any more."

The elder and the philatelist greatly enjoyed this story, the latter especially since he was by profession a banker and appreciated the dig his friend had had at him.

"So I must now tell my Jose story," he said, "which I certainly shall not enjoy as much as yours. To ensure that it has at least some merit I will borrow elements from both your tales, the peasant and the rock. But if you don't mind we will leave such trivial items as bankers and revolu-

tions out of it and look at the whole matter in its proper perspective."

So saying, he embarked upon his story.

"Imagine a sheet of ice, miles and miles wide, covering much of the world. At its most extensive, it reached only half way up the mountain. Then it grew grey, and crumpled and melted and disappeared. In its place, a lake formed, lying at the foot of the mountain.

"Slowly the weather grew warmer. It became hot by day, though the nights remained cool. Several times, the mountain split and its flanks fell into the lake. Things grew on these piles of stones, and along the new ground exposed by the lake as it shrank. In spring, the whole shelf was covered with yellow flowers.

"Distantly, a river broke through on a new course and poured its waters into the lake, whereupon the lake stopped shrinking. Things swam in the lake ; some of them climbed out of the lake. Some of those that climbed out died in the field, but others gained new qualities and flourished.

"One of the animals was ungainly and slow. In the palm of its skull lay a pool of mud through which trickled the waters of its new discovery called thought. It sank into the rock. Of its thought there remained no trace, but the pattern of its bones lay in the quiet strata, making a pattern more pleasing than in life.

"Another animal was full of a vast and automatic fury. Its cry when it hunted cut like a knife and struck the rocks with the force of a hammer. One day, a slab of the mountainside fell upon it, and the slab resembled the head of a serpent.

"Another creature was patient. It tilled the soil between the mountain and the lake and planted vines in the soil and tended them year by year. When it was young, it carved its name JOSE on the rock shaped like a serpent head, and spent the rest of its life in the field, working everywhere round the rock. One day it staggered into the shade of the rock and never rose again.

"Another being learned to extract the energy it required direct from the soil. It bloomed and ferreted and crackled, and again part of the mountain fell, making an avalanche that splashed into the lake for half a day. The thing slowly

annihilated the rubble from the mountain, until it disintegrated from ripeness.

"Now a being of splendour arose that could extract its necessary energy from the whole universe, and so needed to pay no attention to mountain, field, or lake. Because it was sufficient to itself, it destroyed all other life and sat through an eternity sketching elaborate patterns of light in its being, until it was itself translated into light.

"The last thing was a thing of infinite love and infinite might. It grieved for the destruction that had been and determined to create a new system of life based only remotely on the old. It looked about at the silent mountain and lake ; finally it built an entire new universe, shaping it out of the 'O' in JOSE that was carved in the serpent head rock.

"On planets in the new universe, mountains and lakes began to appear. They worked out their own enormous processes in solitude, for the being of love and might had built them a universe safe from life."

The *bon viveur* and the elder both declared themselves impressed by this story, and the latter added, "You take a more bleak and long view of humanity than I dare do at my time of life. You don't really find life as meaningless as all that, do you?"

The philatelist spread his hands. "Yes, sometimes I do—in a place like this, for instance. We are only passing through, and our mood will change. But look at the wretched old guide woman, for instance. What has life to offer her? And look at the region in which she lives, at this profound and aloof grandeur all about us. Is not its meaning greater and more enduring than man's?"

The elder shuddered. "My friend, I prefer to believe that this mountain has no meaning at all until it is translated through man's understanding."

As he spoke, the servant touched him respectfully on the arm. "Excuse me, sir, but I think we really ought to be moving on, because we don't want to be still up here in this exposed place when night falls."

"You are absolutely right, my friend. You are a practical man. All our endeavours should be devoted towards getting away from this lifeless tomb. Whoever Jose was,

he has no interest for any of us now. Tell the old woman to lead on."

They mounted their horses and turned away from the rock with its brief inscription. They followed the servant across the drab and stony soil. The old woman led them on, never once casting her eye back at the spot where, as a young and passionate woman, she had blazed the name of her faithless lover.

— BRIAN ALDISS

EDITORIAL—*continued from page 3*

piece will, I know from many readers' letters, cause much regret for it is the last PAVANE story by Keith Roberts—CORFE GATE. His first story appeared in the old Science Fantasy and he is now my associate editor—no-one who has read his work will think that my admiration for him has anything to do with that. There are greater writers and there are more experienced ones but I seriously believe that there is no more devoted *craftsman* writing today.

— KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

THE WHITE MONUMENT*

A Monologue

by Peter Redgrove

A public garden. Rockeries and wooden benches surround a smooth-shaven lawn that stretches to a small copse of trees, overtopped by the glistening White Monument. Enter, bowler-hatted and stripe-trousered, an official. He pauses, and glances alertly around him. A flicker of quick brown movement between the trees catches his attention. He shouts "Hi!" There emerges slowly from between the trunks a curious, ragged figure who approaches the official, and, sometimes peering up into his face, sometimes pacing up and down before him, acting out his story, speaks:

Bald. Balled. Like a brown, smooth wooden ball that's been cut into three times, down to the white quick. My eyes and my teeth blind nobody, and my soft mahogany tan mitigates my look as I lurk in my trees and grin down my walks. Invisible against the barks, except where I turn to look.

But I'm no bother! *Who's* scared of me then! No no no no, I don't want a salary. What's that? No salary doesn't mean I can stay? But I must, I must.

No, it's all right. I'm not weeping. It's that my eyes won't close, and they water sometimes. Do you want to know why? Do you want to know the grain of my mahogany? Grained-in—shouts mostly. Then sighs. Stare-grained. Not tear-stained. Because I know. You won't get rid of me in a hurry.

Gabble, gabble, gabble. One thing at a time, though I reckon I'm quicker than you. Where do I sleep? Oh ho—you won't find that in a hurry. What? Who says? You'll

*First published by broadcast on the Third Programme.

have to make out papers. Yes, I see. Though I doubt if this'll fit on any form.

You asked about my bed. Well, it's in that brush there. Deeply-pleached. Right at the foot. At the foot of the White Monument. I crouch in my spikes at its foot, and nest in my dirty towels, where once I lived in silk sheets in a great house, of which I was master. Master. Master of it all.

There were miles of it. It covered acres. It nourished townships. Its fleets discovered continents. Families thrived in its service. Staff thronged in its service though more and more they glanced as they went on their errands anxiously up at the chimneys, the wind-battering forest of its chimneys, that combed the wind with their stiff straightnesses, and now began to sound as they did so, to sound as though the sky were a grey tissue, and they, the elderly, the antiquarian, were the comb-and-tissue paper instrument of a nasty little boy, to make their farcical row, jocular raspberried buzz, in the face of our comings and goings, our prosperous throngings. (*Blows derisively.*)

But what a big boy! This dreadful noise grew, and dignity could not sustain it. Nobody would call on a house that cocked its snooks like this every time the wind blew.

Trifling and smutty on a boy's scale, a great mansion resounded and roared like the surf of a great sea, and battered and broke our prosperity. Close up, it had the dignity of an eruption of nature, the inflamed majesty of a geyser, say, but further off there was no mistaking it (*Blow*) so further off they went, out of sight, and sound (*Blow*). Emigrated. (*Blow*) Bought far-off (*Blow*) farms with our superfluous prosperity (*Blow*). With no people we could not prosper. Out of phase with the blood (*Blow blow*) it shivered the timbers. In the emptying house it (*Blow*) echoed louder through ballroom and closet.

My wife—whom I dearly love, and shall, for ever—stayed on, for we had nowhere else to go. We closed much of the house, and kept a few rooms for ourselves, the best of these being my wife's small parlour, a pretty room with figured brocade wallpaper, a sad sight in that noise. Sitting alone in that room one night there came a sudden slip and a slither from behind the mantelpiece and bricked-up fireplace, a crack, the thump and rattle of, I should guess,

brickwork breaking free, in a small avalanche hurtling down and passing away far under our feet. (*Derisive imitations*). A hoot. Another. A third.

And then rose on top of it all a stately diapason roar, a great continual pounding thud that shook our heads and stretched our mouths to scream words we could not ourselves hear. It was the same noise, but now great enough to worship, as if we were savages.

No that's not why my teeth grin and grit, but it was the beginning, and the beginning of the long days of our torment, in which we were strangely happy, for we slept the only way we could, by exhaustion, by piling act upon act of love.

II

It was the sound of the one old chimney. The sound of the hundreds bore in on the one, the useless, the blocked-up, the fishing-net cobwebbed one, the gruff roar like an enormously prolonged belch with the flap inside it of the tough and winding cobwebs, and a damned moaning up and down the scale into the bargain. It caught you by the throat and threw you down exhausted. No, that is not the reason for my staring eyes. Listen, and I will tell you. Nor even for my gritting teeth. Man can endure more, much more.

I was the man of the house. It was up to me to get on to the roof and do something about it. I couldn't stop the wind blowing. If it was the wind and not subterranean siphoning. Blood streaming from my ears I searched the ranks of chimneys, staggering like a man drunk in a forest. All was thudding, all shaking. There it was—in the centre of the sound's circle, blurred with the haze of its vehement sounding. It took all my strength to stagger half-way down the ladder back again, and I fell the rest of the way. But I had the culprit marked down!

Until I could act we existed as though we were drowned in a lake of clear and invisible slowly-shaking sound. As I stood on my ample hills among the green groining of this tall country, master of what I surveyed, that which should have crowned my lairdship, the mansion of my generations, the seat of my ancestry, blew its unpausing raspberry at

the face of and in the sight of heaven, stung my roving pride and sensibilities of ownership so that they recoiled and thought too much of the body they were lodged in, the good rolling moist brown earth became a vascular pink in my dazed eyes, like the inner lip, the breeze off the fertile pasture body-warm and breath-moist. The bolled and coiling clouds pass from entrance to exit over one's head, which is no more than the be-sensed and flagellated anterior knob of a bacterium skipping among breech-grass and bum-leaves. He crouches and dodges among the crowded discards and pellets. He piles his hearth and home like a pellet-stack, he twiddles his legs slowly like the hurry of a dung-beetle. He wonders what the breeze will bring next; the effluvium would precipitate a judgement. My wife complained of sympathetic indigestion. We were shaken, as by the fundamentals of the universe. To place one's whisky-and-soda on a mantelpiece was to lose it in a pop and puff like a fluff of cream. It crazed the china like Ming, till it flopped in its gravy-soaked pieces. Cut flowers speeded up. Matured in a flash. Shook them open. Shook them to dust. Meat grew tender as bread.

My dreams were unspeakable. I was in the old cathedral while the organ played *Gravissima*. A grey tomb at my side, carved with the peaceful likeness of a reclining bishop, slowly split down the middle to the thud of the music, and the two parts fell aside like a wet apple. There, on his bier, in the centre of the tomb, lay the remains of him, clothed in his gorgeous vestments, with his head of naked bone. Then the saw-teeth of the skull-seams started to the gruff music, crrreak, and here lay the bones of the head splayed out on the pistil of the neckbone in the calyx of the high gilt collar. Then I was in my tomb with the others around with the heads of us fresh corpses jerking like puppies caught in purses. Our dead brains leapt in our heads like starving animals—trying to use our teeth to bite their way out of the racket.

We awoke to a world as unreal. Where there was parquet with rugs, a loose mist covered the floor, ankle-deep, like the marshes at dawn. The dust of generations was un-jammed from the joined wood and kept in continual motion by the great bloated roar. Wool, cotton, silk, skin-scale, skin-salt, hair. And one day, with the noise of a well-drilled

regiment presenting arms, all the oak panelling in the dining-room shook free from its criss-cross framing, as though the whole wall had opened in doors, giving on the basic brick of the house, that was never meant to be seen again. And what a symphony of bedsprings there was if you put your ear to the doors of the closed bedrooms!

So we lived out our sound-sick days, conversing with dry slates and pencils.

III

Concrete! That was the answer. All knitted and wadded up I measured the chimney by triangulation and calculated the volume required. It took our savings. I borrowed a mixer and block-and-tackle to get it up on the roof. The grey, corpse-heavy sacks. Water hose-piped from the stables. The noose of a cable round the stack, down to the tractor. Heave-ho—crash! and a great open throb as if we'd laid open the chest where the heart beat.

Up I scrambled. Shoulder behind the churning mixer, up to the hole. Ear-plugs, balaclava, oxygen mask didn't save me from a terrible jarring. A long strong heave—and the grey magma lolloped and spewed into the square pit that seemed to pucker and spread with the great throb.

Blessed Saints! It changed!—up an octave on the first load. I threw myself full-length in joy. Plucked out the ear-plugs. But, quick! no delay. Second load, fourth, fifth; half-a-dozen; a dozen; two: from a throb to a deep gabble, to a moan, to a piercing shriek, a piercing whistle, a plop, a sigh, and a hard abrupt plug, then—silence!

And now I could see the grey pebbly surface rising into the sunlight, hic-cupping slightly, popping and whispering.

All was quiet. I leant on my spade, looking round. A great shoulder of ivy had slipped, and beetled directly over the front door. Many tiles had gone, and many more protruded like rude tongues, showing fresh red hindparts. Then I carefully and with heartfelt thanks bent and tipped the last of the last load in, up to the brickwork rim, and got down on my knees to smooth off the surface with a small plank. A thick pillar of hardening breccia now spitted my house, bore it up, and silenced it.

Down the ladder I scrambled, slipping a little in my excitement, and fumbled the front door open. Inside, it was very quiet, not even the radio playing. In the unusual hush the creaking and snapping that usually goes on in the wood of old houses at sundown was louder and more brisk than usual. There was a slight pungency in the air, like hot fat. It was cool in the hall, and it was a palpable quiet. You could run your tongue round it, like a stone, and I did so, pausing in the hall, savouring the anticipation of my wife's pleasure, as she waited now in the little parlour with the figured brocade walls, eyes closed, head thrown back, drinking up that silence. Our thoughts would not now be shattered like bubbles; the juices we raised in each other not blown like spume. Our thoughts, indeed, and our love would race, there being nothing now to check either. I strode across the quiet, dim, polished hall, and flung the parlour door, which caught a little, open on a blank stone wall.

IV

I drew back, and looked up and down the hall. Stone, certainly. With a hinged door on it. A slab. I ran my hands over it. Rough, seating and cool. A garland of flowers, intaglio on the porous stone, looped across the upper part, repeating the door's design, as though impressed there. Impressed! Yes. Right. Stern and sturdy. Impregnable. Uninflammable. Eighty feet tall and God knows how deep. My great shaft with its weight had leant on the bricked fireplace of my wife's room, and entered.

Pressed in, and smoothed down. Set as I stood inhaling the silence of a hall as quiet as the inside of a stone. Entering a little hooked stone finger through the keyhole, that had caught the door, and snapped short. Plodding and plopping and hissing as though the shingle had become the tide, rounding on itself, her chair, her table, too fast for thought, setting with a click!

I faced the blank memorial slab. The silence lay like its weight on the nerves. She, gagged with a grey tongue, sat immovable and everlasting in her high-backed chair, to last

beyond the lives of men till the last fire split her tomb. What a damfool thing to do.

V

A beam of heat beat on my back. A sudden swathe of smoke caught me round the neck. Crackle and creak under my feet. What's up? That wet slag had short-circuited her electric fire and the fuse-boxes were exploding! One thing after another! Was I to be robbed even of the consolation of a vigil by her tomb, in the draughty corridor, camping in the hall? Sarah! I cried, Sarah! and beat my fists on the stone till the blood ran down—Sarah!

But I turned and flung myself through the flames out of the house. My hair puffed out in a flash. The smock I was wearing, spread stiff with concrete, glowed white as I ran through a great coxcomb of flames jetting sideways out of the old kitchen range where lead pipes splashed like water and weltered and glittered in its lead. I have never been able to stop my nose streaming since, or to get the smoke out of my nostrils.

Outside it was no cooler, for the whole house was ablaze, right up to our old nurseries, whose fine mullioned windows bulged and ripped as I watched, bulged red panes like gouged eyes. Flames ran along beams like straw, relinquishing masonry into the crowd and rush of the fire's centre. It was a long drop to the foundations and deep cellars filling up now with our old stone, banked and hearthed, with the gush of the gas mains blowing through it, raising it to such a heat that it seemed a pure white and dazzling light flowed from the interior of the ragged shell, beaming through the punched out cavernous windows, streaming up in radiance like a miracle of the Grail, carrying with it the last bolsters and curds of impenetrable smoke, whose underbelly seemed like a great travelling shoal of leaping blood-red dolphins. Then in fell the walls, on the sinking white bank with no uncouth bellowing sound, but with a noise like applause. And now I saw that the flames had fired the chimney clean of the house, stood it up in its singleness, wrapped by crimson bellowing, and beginning now to glow with its own white light. And there too, rising out of the white hot

rubble, fastened at its foot, was a small block-house or shed, fired clean too, the mould of the tomb I had poured her with my own hands.

The tomb was beginning to glow, and the fierce white light from the pit stretched its shadow along the charred lawn towards me, a shadow that thinned as the tomb took more light into itself. Perched on the white hot grate of rocks as it was, gas fired, it got hotter and hotter, red first, like a cube of cloudy jelly, and gradually I began to perceive shapes and shadows in it, which grew in definition as heat clarified it. Now it glowed like a ruby and I saw the china cabinet, tilted and suspended over the high back of her chair, which grew sharper at first, and then filmy, so that the sight of her shape fell through it. My forearm shielding my face I darted and then sidled round, closer and closer, my clothes smouldering again, my eyes staring, my face darker and darker tanned as I approached the sun in the heart of which my former love sat enthroned, my eyes starting and unblinking as their lids dried and stiffened, fixing my face in this expression of final worship and adulation. I felt my lips draw off my gums, and my expression harden like a footprint in clay. But there she was, her dear face, caught as in a limelight, brightened into view, her eyes open, but at first in shadow, with the lashes, and the cheeks rounded as in life, and her mouth slightly open, as though drinking in the silence at the heart of that glassy stone. In her setting then she got brighter and brighter, radiant in beauty, of the texture of tangled silver wire, her eyes shining like blown coals, branded on my eyes, the little blue flames flickering among my clothes, until I could feel and see no more, the tears boiling on my cheeks and my lids fastened up like stone. . . .

VI

The rain fell like steel poles and we stood plunged in its downward river. The vision faded as downpour chilled the stone from cherry-red to black to streaming grey, and the last I saw in its muddying depths was the embers of two eyes snapping out as though the eyes had suddenly winked shut, though the black and red negative swum and swung like a drowned person in my eyes.

Then the steam rose, swung and tossed by the wind in long curds and banners, and the rain boiled. Beyond, in the pit of the foundations, I could hear the rattle and dull boom as the rocks and stones of our home split and powdered in the douche of cold rain, puffed in the quenching, and ran together like soil in a flower-bed, as you, sir, see it now, planted and pretty, with the White Monument rising at its border, and the white tomb at its foot.

The rain did not split or crumble her monument, but annealed it, annealed and glazed it, white and shining, built to last, the monument and tomb white as silver. When the first light showed me this, and all the gardens and lawns scorched and brittled by the raying heat, I shuffled away to the little wood a mile above our house, where I could keep her monument in good sight still, and threw myself down on a mattress of leaves, which were sheltered, but still crisp as toast crumbs.

Since then for twenty-five years I have haunted this place and tended it as a garden, trimmed the hedges and planted walks, diverted streams to murmur beneath pleached and matted roses, with the great whiteness of the tower rising behind like a cenotaph. That bowling-green now springs over the fine ashes of our home. From the time when I saw the thin green tendrils fingering among the charred and broken lumps of our turf, and the bracken came, and I took heart, this garden has been mine. And my tribute.

Too smooth for moss or lichen, too tall to be razed, your new town admires it, and it has countenanced me. Look at these four walls imprinted with intaglio of bramble roses, worked against a background of woven texture—the imprinted memory of tapestried wallpaper. You should venerate it; I have explained it to you. I am not yours to be taken from it. It is your luck, and I am its mascot. I am no charge on you. I eat berries and roast the sparrows that steal the seeds. Let it be. I would kill to keep here. What a chapter of accidents!

But I am restless for the silver anniversary of our fire next Guy Fawkes night. I shall get all the louts of the town up here, and we shall pull down the trellises heavy with roses, and root up the bushes reeking of verbena, and pile the urns of geraniums round and round, and we shall burn them at the tomb's foot, and won't they be surprised!

because I have oxygen and acetylene here, in cylinders, buried round it, with which I once tried to light a peephole in the stone, and I shall turn on the jets and the great flame shall heat up the walls, stream up them and light up her room and the heart of her sun and I shall run through the flames to her and I shall pass into the wall like a puff of thick powder and leave only my shadow, running, with arms outstretched.

— PETER REDGROVE

THE BEAUTIFUL MAN

by Robert Clough

The valley twisted between steep hills. The goats moved slowly. They had fed since early morning ; now they were drowsy in the midday heat.

The three men who walked behind them were drowsy also. They moved heavily. Squat, hairy men, they were ; ill shaped, and with nothing of beauty about them. They wore jerkins of goatskin, and their legs and plodding feet were bare.

The flat-nosed man looked up at baked brown hills, and a brazen sky. He licked thick lips, and spat.

"Had the gods been kind to me, I would be a fisher. Then I would not have sore feet, and a gullet full of dust."

It was a thought. In their slow way, the other two considered it.

"Had they been kind to me," said the young man called Yan, "I would be a hunter."

"You would still have sore feet."

"True. But I should be alive. Are we alive? If it is true that the dead walk, then I think that they walk behind goats."

The third man was thin and grey. Chak, he was called. A quiet man, who thought more deeply than most.

"The gods are kind to few," he said, "A man must take what is given. And there is work more weary than the tending of goats. Sometimes I watch the flint cutters, and then I am glad that I do not sit all day in one place, making axe heads till I dream of axe heads."

"I dream of goats," said Yan. "Also, I stink of goats. And a flint cutter at least has importance, because of his skill. But if a goat herd speaks, who listens?"

"We do a useful thing, and that is something for pride," Chak said gently.

They had reached a bend in the valley, and the goats were moving still more slowly. As the men turned the bend behind them, they saw the reason. A great mass of the southern hill face had fallen away. The narrow pass was blocked with broken rock.

Chak looked up at the bare bluff of newly exposed limestone.

"Such a thing happens seldom in the dry season."

The flat-nosed man grunted agreement.

There was a hole at the foot of the bluff, black against its whiteness. Yan pointed, with sudden interest.

"Look—a cave. Let us go up, and see what is in it."

The flat-nosed man laughed.

"What could there be, in a hole that has been sealed since the beginning of things?"

Yan frowned, and spat. To have said so foolish a thing was not good for pride.

"If it were a magic place, full of the wonders of which the Old Ones speak, still there would be some who could look no higher than the back end of a goat. I will go up. It will be something to tell, that I stood in a place where no man ever stood before."

He crossed to the base of the slope, and began to pick a way upward among the tumbled rocks. The other two looked at each other. They could hardly have said what made them turn and follow.

"It is true . . . it will be something to tell . . ." Chak said.

It was a climb that would have been easy for men better favoured; for such as were hunters and fishers. For these three, it was hard. Yet as goatherds they had come to have a certain agility among rocks, and they moved upward slowly.

They were sweating and breathless when they halted on a broad ledge before the hole in the rock. The hole was roughly round, and high as a man's shoulder. Against the sunlight reflected from the new rock face, it was forbiddingly dark. The three hesitated, peering in.

It was Yan who, with a quick breath, entered first. Pride demanded this. The other two followed. They stumbled, and then stood still while their eyes became used to the dimness.

The place they were in was no more than ten paces long

and seven in width. Its walls sloped inward to a low roof. Its floor had a curious roughness, as though many odd shaped things had become merged into one rocky whole.

"Nothing . . ." Chak said.

"You had thought there would be something?" the flat nosed man asked curiously.

"It is foolish. Yet it is as though I had expected . . . *something*. . . ."

"Here is something," Yan said.

His eyes had picked out a familiar outline in the roughness of the floor. He kicked twice with the bone hard sole of his foot, and the thing came loose. A shard of limestone fell away from it, showing a hole. Two holes. Chak exclaimed sharply.

Under the rough coating of limestone was a man's skull.

"Now how can this be?" asked the flat-nosed man in wonder. "How came a man in here? Is there another way into this place?"

There was no other way in. Chak frowned, thoughtfully.

"It must be," he said, "that this place was once before as it is now—an open cave. It was sealed, I think, by the stone which is in water."

Yan laughed, but with uncertainty.

"How can stone be in water?"

"There is a sort of stone, which is in water," said Chak, the thoughtful man. "Do not the women scrape it from the insides of their cooking pots?"

He moved to the opening and looked out, measuring the depth of the scar on the hillside.

"How many years must have passed, for such a thickness of the water-stone to grow?" He spoke as if to himself, rather than to the others. "As many, surely, as the stars in the sky. And who would think that anything could be left of a man, after a time so long?"

The flat-nosed man shook his head, feeling a queer sadness. Yan, less sensitive, was kicking again with his hard foot at the odd projections of the floor. Now they saw that there were many skulls, and other bones.

"Surely so many could not have lived in this place," said the flat-nosed man. "Perhaps it was a place of burial."

"Or perhaps they came here to hide from enemies," Chak said. "Or to take refuge from a flood."

"And died here?" said Yan.

"It may be that their enemies found them, and killed them. Or that they died of hunger, or a sickness."

"It is a mystery," said the flat-nosed man, wisely.

Yan's foot had exposed things which were not bones; but what these things were, the three could not know. Their shapes were unfamiliar, and distorted by the limestone which had preserved them.

Yan tried to tap the incrustation from many of these things, vainly. Then, as he struck at something flat and shapeless, a great flake of stone fell from it cleanly. The three peered, with quick exclamations, at what was exposed. Something once smooth, now pitted and rough, but still clear in fair detail.

"Now this is indeed a wonder," said Yan, picking the thing up. "An image. The image of a man."

"It is so. A man. He lies asleep, with his arms outstretched."

Yan brought the thing to the light, and they stared at it wonderingly.

"It is finely wrought," Chak said. "Never have I seen a carving so finely wrought."

"These people had sharp tools," mused the flat-nosed man.

"Indeed," said Chak, "it seems that the Old Ones are right when they say that the true art of flint cutting has been lost. Is it of bone, this thing?"

"It is too cold for bone, yet has not the coldness of stone," said Yan. He looked for a long time at the image in his hands. "He was a beautiful man, this one. I have never seen a man of so fine a shape."

"He was indeed of a perfect shape," agreed the flat-nosed man. "Were the people of that time truly so, I wonder? Or is this but the dream of an image maker?"

"Who can know?" Chak said.

Yan stroked the image, from which he could not take his eyes.

"I will keep this."

"It is better that you leave it," Chak told him. "It is said that when an image is made of a man, something of his

spirit goes into it. And ghostly things are best left in their own place."

Yan grunted derisively, but there was uncertainty in him. After a moment, with slow reluctance, he set the image down where he had found it. The act seemed in some way to mark an ending, and the three men moved out of the cave. There was a silence upon them as they made their slow way down the rock-strewn slope. It was broken only by the flat-nosed man.

"Who would have thought to find such a wonder? The image . . . and all those who died, so long ago. . . ."

At the bottom of the hill, where the goats sleepily waited, they sat to rest. For them, even the descent had not been easy. In these days, as Chak had said, the gods were kind to few, and to these three they had not been kind. The mother of Chak had wept when her child came forth, armless. The mother of the flat-nosed man had had less cause to weep, since he had one arm, though it was without a hand. Of the three goatherds, only Yan had two arms and hands; but they were no bigger than those of a three-years child.

"The image . . . it stays in my mind," said the flat-nosed man. "The sleeper . . . perhaps he was no man, but a god among those people."

Chak shook his head.

"He was no god. And it is strange that they should have made an image of him; for plainly he was a wrongdoer, suffering punishment."

"How can you know this?" the flat-nosed man asked.

"It was evident," Chak said. "He was not, as you thought, lying asleep with outstretched arms. He was hanging. Had you looked more closely, you would have seen that spikes had been driven through his hands and feet, and through his sides. So he could not have been a god."

"True. He could not have been a god."

Yan sighed.

"God or man, he had a beautiful shape. Could I but have been made like him. Then I would have been a hunter."

— ROBERT CLOUGH

PATTERN AS SET

by John Rankine

Mark Bowden was spending more and more time simply standing in the short, white corridor which ended in the sealed hatch of the thermal control block. Twelve months' solitary confinement was coming to an end, and in spite of all the training and the ample provision of every kind of substitute to fill the social vacuum, he was good and ready to hear another human voice coming across live, and see other human flesh in 3D. Particularly that. Particularly so, since his relief was Dena Holland.

There, indeed, was other human flesh with a bonus. Whatever else he turned his mind to, it swung back like a compass needle to the immovable magnetic pole of Dena's many-sided attraction. Now he was seeing again the leave they had spent between the last training session and the final commissioning of *Cyborax*. Six days on the island reserved for research personnel with only the most tactful and unobtrusive supervision. If the medical people were doing a calory count and if the isometric drills were still in the daily programme, it was possible not to notice and to believe that they were normal and alone.

Swimming in the gin-clear water of the harbour. Walking on springy turf across the headland. Sun all the time, burning pictures of Dena into his brain, like the etching fluid on a lithographic plate. Silky, red gold hair, which turned into a dark copper sheath when it was wet, emphasising the modelling of her head with its classically satisfying balance of proportion. Beneath it all, the indefinable feeling that he had known her before, always known her and that their meeting was only recognition.

The overriding, lasting impression was of a smiling face. Smiling in a way which was more than the common social rictus. Even during the recurrent checking sessions she would be smiling, minimising it, taking its sting. At night, *'en bonne maitresse, grave et sérieux'*, there would still be an underlying smile.

But he had to close his mind to that. He walked rapidly back into the quiet control centre and did the routine checks on the presentation panel of the computer bank. For such a massive ship as *Cyborax*, it was not a big room. In the centre, gymbol mounted, a single acceleration couch for the pilot and a concentration of miniature duplicates of the individual consoles. For take-off, one man controlled everything. Three other couches were folded back, ready to take the chief executives of power, navigation and communications during the long distant period of landfall.

In spite of his rapid movements and surface attention to what he was doing, Mark Bowden could not exorcise his pleasant ghost. It was a classic case, he realised, of motivation. He could tell his mind what it ought to be doing and flog it along the path; but what it wanted to do was to be still and consider a picture of Dena which had come up. Sitting up out of his arms, pale brown skin, satin smooth, velvet soft, slightly salt to his lips moving down from the curve of the shoulder. He forced his mind away and went on.

The sidereal plot showed nothing new. Changes were slow. For a long time it had presented basically the same star clusters. A kind of luminous expectancy on the far northern perimeter, global-wise, showed that something was due to come into vision from that quarter. It would be something big to be heralded that way. Dena would see it. He checked himself. There it was again. Everything related itself to her. It was just as well there was less than twenty-four hours to go.

He went round the individual consoles and confirmed that readings were normal. The enterprise was in good shape. Speed approaching the maximum, course right, data being processed, recorded, digested, fed back into the robot navigators.

The black polished screen above the navigation desk was blank. He threw a key to bring in scanning eyes in the outer sheath, for a picture of the outside of the ship, a diurnal check. Visual inspection for meteoritic damage. There had been none yet; but any second could bring the statistically unlikely accident, which would send him on through the prescribed sequence of repair drills.

Waiting for the screen to fill, he found himself staring fixedly at his own reflection. Long oblong face, high forehead, shaven head. Body hair was a casualty in the cause of clinically sterile surfaces for the long years in thermal control. He had kept it that way because in any case it would have to come off when he went back. Dena would be the same. He had not faced that with any realism.

He concentrated, to see his own face instead of hers in the black mirror. An intelligent face. Calm and controlled. A complete mask for the ceaseless flow of introspection. That presumably was so for everyone. I think, therefore I am. Grey eyes, wide apart. Mouth set now in a thin line. Age, when it was allowed, would make a right rat trap out of that feature.

Then the outlines of the ship began to form and he had something else to do. Cone first, slowly round to the starboard quarter: port to the same point symmetrically; gleaming surfaces unmarked. Two aerial stubs showed up and he activated the gear. Slim antennae extended and retracted in perfect order.

As the range extended, a line of blank ports came into view: the thermal control block. He had already worked it out that Dena must be behind the fourth port in the lower bank. A new thought went ahead to the next change-over.

So, far, he had not seen beyond their own meeting; the time now coming up, when the automatic awakening process would start and the refrigerated pack would be delivered to the resurrection bay. Then Dena would come out. Honeycomb foam plastic dropping away as she broke free, rebirth of Venus, new style.

After a day or so she would be fully recovered, then they would have about five days together before he was due to go into cold storage himself. Now he began to think of the remote end of her tour of duty. She would wait for and welcome Stoddard, the number one navigation executive.

That was not good. Not good at all. Stoddard would also have the job of preparing her for refrigeration. He stuck there, considering the angles. Damn Stoddard, he would take every chance he could get. Bowden found himself struggling to suppress a rising anger. This was stupid.

They were professional people ; the cream of the cream of the advanced society that had sent them on this mission. Here he was bringing it all down to the absurd level of primitive sex jealousy.

It would not go away. Perhaps he should stay out of the thermal control the whole year with Dena? Then Stoddard could put them both away together. But even whilst his mind toyed with his, he knew perfectly well that it could not be done.

The mission was a finely calculated thing. Food reserves for the one hundred year round trip were reckoned on the assumption that only one crew member would be awake at a time. Altering the scale of consumption could throw out a number of interlocking factors. Progressive weight reduction for one. Oxygen consumption. Water from the fuel cells only accumulated fast enough to supply one person for any length of time. Big reserves would be needed for the middle phase, when all were awake and success or failure might hinge on logistics.

So the pattern as set had to be preserved. *Cyborax* had left the pad with twenty-four of its twenty-five personnel in deep freeze. Each year, the computer controlled machinery with micro-metric accuracy would deliver one man or woman to the resurrection bay, the incumbent would surrender the keys of the kingdom and take the vacant slot. They had been rehearsed in the drill and during training each had experienced the suspended animation. It worked.

From his point of view, it had seemed like a brief hiatus when Reg Golding had leaned over the box and clapped his ham hands in noisy welcome, helping to scrape off the remnants of foam packaging, saying, "Out of it Mark, boy. Who've you got in there, eh?"

In the twenty-four years he had not aged or changed. He had felt unsteady for an hour, as though his balance was impaired ; granules frozen solid in the gravy of the semi-circular canals. But then it had worn off and he felt fine.

Golding had been glad to take his place. He had said, "If ever this is done again, Mark, we should insist on joint watch details. Training is no kind of preparation for this. However rigorous the schedules are made, you can't

fool the subconscious; the cunning wee bastard *knows* that it isn't for real and that there's buttered crumpet waiting in the parlour. But this is something else. Here, you dredge right down into the why and wherefore. Keep the tapes going. Don't be too long silent."

When he was ready for urn burial, he had some difficulty in swallowing down the heavy, viscous liquid which protected internal tissue and contained a knock-out drop to ease the journey into the ice. When it was done he said thickly, "It reminds me of the old story about the hypochondriac type who sent for the quack because she couldn't enjoy her food. When he asked what she had eaten for her last meal, she said, 'I managed to get a little rabbit down.' And he said," Reg's voice was slurring now; but he was grinning like a madman at the *dénouement*, which he was trying to achieve. "He said, 'Then, madam, you don't need a doctor. What you need . . . what you need is a bloody ferret'."

He finished it in a hoarse whisper and was still grinning when the cold set him that way.

Thinking about Reg had improved his temper; but there was a residue of nagging doubt which would take some moving. Fortunately, thought stopped in the cold store or it would have been unendurable. A quarter of a century immured in a solid block, with impotent jealousy corroding like vitriol from inside! Even laughter would have had its danger. Reg there trying to finish his laugh off would be a raving lunatic when next circulated.

Mark Bowden found he was looking at the screen without seeing it and went back over the last scan. It showed a long oblong. From the periscope housing, with its flared heat shield, to the base of the two starboard thrust tubes. Nothing remarkable, but something had broken his train of thought and re-directed his attention. He looked again. This time he saw what it could have been. An area about the diameter of a tennis ball, a metre in from the tubes. Discolouration? Or something more?

He steadied magnification. When the area was plate size, there was no longer any doubt, a small hole was surrounded by a dark, blue-violet penumbra where the surface had suffered chemical change.

In some ways, he was glad of the action. Getting out

the excursion module and making the repair would take several hours. It would pass the time. A filled interval was subjectively shorter than an unfilled one and here, at least, the only clock was subjective.

Below the cone, a section of heat shield retracted to make an exit hatch for the module. Getting into the cramped semi-robot was a lengthy chore in itself. It was also a further diminution of personality, a surrender of another part of the self. The heavy ovoid was powered for extensive reconnaissance on every kind of inhospitable surface. Tethered on an extending cable, it could trundle its way round the superstructure by surface adhesion and use its four flexible grabs to fine limits of workmanship.

Mark Bowden had used it on training sessions, but never before to make a repair. He found that he was now using it without much sympathy and some of his usually meticulous skill with things mechanical had deserted him. On the first run down he overshot the mark. The slope of the rocket tube cowling launched him out and the module went off at a tangent to the full extent of its tether.

Cyborax from outside looked unreal against a deep, violet backdrop. A stationary silver tank, going nowhere. Metaphysical speculation stopped when the slow turn of the hull brought the thermal control block ports into vision. Dena was in there; not long now, before he would see her again. Better get on with this job. It would be too bad if there was no one to welcome her. Could be dangerous too, to waken into a silent world without another human being.

The casual gyration had already wound his chain once round the hull. He did some rapid calculation and fired a tiny rocket to give the ovoid working speed. Then he steered it round the ship, cleared the chain, wound back and started again. That was the first of six attempts before he was finally located over the hole and tackling the repair.

Time meant nothing. Even natural appetite was dulled so that no inner compulsion counted towards a meal time. Indeed, training had already done a good deal to blanket out that kind of personal clock. It was arguable that there was more psychological dislocation in this than the head shrinkers had allowed for. Anyway he had defeated the

ploy by having a ticking clock of another kind. The year of vigil had been so many seconds, minutes, hours, days until Dena came out. And the time was almost up.

One patch was lost. It took off with enough acceleration to take it skimming out of sight. The second was a success and he buffed the finished surface until it was lost in uniform tone with the rest. Then he hauled in and sank the module into its niche.

Time was running out. But there was no change in the control centre. It could be a meal time. He decided to wait and began to collect items for a celebratory reunion dinner; rummaging through the manifest to see what *recherché* dishes were still on the menu. Basic foods were reconstituted from staples and the foundation of all was the quick growing protein grass in the hydroponic tanks; but one or two luxury stores had been taken along. When it was assembled with a tall bottle in the centre it looked quite impressive.

He remembered meals on the terrace of the hotel, built out from the cliff face. Incredible sunsets, with Dena's hair meeting a rival in the red gold light. This time, there would only be the clinical, harsh, white light of the ward room. Perhaps he could dim it down? She would say with Jessica, "What, must I hold a candle to my shames?" She might even feel herself to be grotesque.

A warning ping from the control centre drew him back there to stand in front of the computer bank.

The time had come as it always did in the end. The one certainty in an uncertain universe; the only truly inexorable thing. Whatever you did to mitigate it, or hold back the process it always caught up with you in the end; the slow bleeding away of the self. Only man carried his own bomb.

This time, anyway, had come, and the end of the week would come just as surely and the end of the year that left her with Stoddard. Dials showed the process begun. Thermal activity was being pumped in at the rhythm of a beating heart. Soon now, she would be stirring in the light foam.

Checking a rising excitement, he went round the consoles with particular attention to power. All was well. Dead on course for the immensely distant objective. Whispering

mercury ion engines pushing out their tireless thrust which had accelerated them to half the speed of light. Communications, processing, sifting and collating data to feed it in pre-digested titbits to the master mind.

Then he gave up all pretence of being a professional engineer and thankfully allowed his mind, without reservation, to go over to waiting for the girl. He went into the corridor and looked into the reception bay. That was all right. Less than ten minutes to go. Check the table again. Clothing? How stupid, of course she would want the pleasure of wearing something even though there was little necessity temperature wise.

He went to the narrow locker room where each crew member had five cubic feet of storage space. Small dance steps, to a rhythm that was beating in his head, fitted in with his movements and he thumped on each panel as he checked off the names; double taps as he read off the name, DENA HOLLAND: COMMUNICATIONS.

Lightweight robe, pale, translucent blue-green; white sandals. She could get anything else herself. Music. He had a microtape ready and keyed it in. Chocolate box stuff, but right for his mood; Tchaikovsky's Fantasy Overture, a prime statement of nostalgia. The theme of the star-crossed lovers would be just about belting out when she came through the hatch.

Nothing to do but wait like a Turkish bath attendant. Temperature coming up into the eighties. Physiological data should be registering any time now. Each storage box had multiple connections with the control console, with leads going back to the frozen tenant for a blow by blow record of the score.

No heart beat yet. A few more degrees. Brain currents, not registering. Temperature pulsed itself over the ninety. Now surely? The presentation panel responded to his query and a new set of dials came in. It had estimated the unusual pattern of the subject's responses and was introducing emergency measures. A powerful stimulant was prepared for injection. Temperature steadied at ninety-eight. Respiration nil. Heart nil. Brain nil.

He went at a run to the delivery bay. The robot could do no more. It had started the delivery sequence so that its charge could be handled by its peers.

Cor anglais and muted violas were introducing the first of the lyric themes when the white oblong slid out in its cremation in reverse. Momentarily, she was as he had expected she would be. A pale sculptured form lying on a bank of pink tissue. He had cleared the torso to the waist when it began to collapse. It melted away ; withered away ; shrank as a snow figure would disappear in front of a furnace door, until what was left was horrible, obscene, a twisted, atrocious caricature of a human being.

He had gone ice cold himself. Moving like a zombie, he went back to the control centre and began the emergency drill. God knew what contamination this would release into the ship. He passed the box to a disposal bay, where it was baked biologically clean, its contents incinerated and expelled as a flurry of dust.

The music had come to its heart-stopping halt and now began its sombre epilogue with reminiscence of earlier themes. It had not been a bad choice at that. He snapped it off and tried to think. There was no doubt what he would have to do: override the time selector and dig out Stoddard. A salutary shock for that one. He wouldn't be expecting . . . but of course he wouldn't be expecting anything, except at the last moment when the brain took up where it had left off and recreated the state of mind of twenty-three years back. But with Stoddard you could bet it would be a lecherous state of mind at that.

Using manual gear, which shortened the chain of events, he had the next box set up for delivery in five minutes flat. Then he gave the robot gear its head. It was routine. He went into the corridor and felt the flimsy robe against his ankles. He wouldn't like Stoddard to make any crack about that ; so he quickly took it and the sandals back to her locker.

Once again it was time. Heat at ninety-four and no joy on any dial. Panic seized him and he ran backwards and forwards from the bay to the control panel, hammering with clenched fists on the motionless gauges, shouting, "Move, you stupid bastards, move!"

When the box came out, he knew it would be no good. For the record, he forced himself to look. Then he was back, sending the mess through the decontamination routine.

After that, he worked in a kind of bitter fury. Box after box. A macabre, compulsive ritual. Already he knew how it would be. There was a hold-up at the tenth. Warning came up that a period of rest would be required for the disposal bay to replenish itself. He had worked through a sleep period, but he could not sleep. He took some food and a long drink. Then set to work to see it through to its inescapable end.

As he went through the list and the times of incarceration shortened, he began to hope that there would be one at least to come out alive. Surely, Reg would have made it; but Reg Golding's contorted grin lasted only five seconds before the flesh fell away.

At first, Mark Bowden only thought of which way out to go. He could take refrigeration himself and leave *Cyborax* to get on with it. Or he could change course and send his prison into the nearest asteroid. Open the hatches; fire it like a longship on a different ocean. He was not thinking systematically at all. Wandering all over the ship, he stared out of the ports without seeing the little there was, time and again finding himself back at the control centre.

Slowly, he became very angry. Angry at the unchanging scan on the stellar display. Angry at the error, whatever it was, that had moled and sapped their careful enterprise. A quarter century to go, before the planned land-fall and a doubtful thing whether one man could carry out the manoeuvres to do it. But twenty-five years was a long time; he could perhaps work something out in that time. Even the take-off was not impossible; but he could not expect to survive the trip back. But he might set *Cyborax* on its way and leave a robot call going which would alert an Earth-based reception unit.

Why bother? What did it now matter? A tide of impotent fury against the facts of the situation, slow moving, like the circulation of lymph swamped out the question. It mattered because it mattered because it mattered. The indefinable feeling of but. It was up to him to make their deaths meaningful. They had accepted this mission with knowledge of the uncertainty of ever seeing it through. Unless each one was prepared to take it on to the limit of endurance, it diminished the rest, made a

nonsense of their lives to this point. Doubt had a recrudescence. Suppose it was, indeed, a nonsense, an illusion, nothing real outside the consciousness of self?

But he knew that was false ; because of Dena. They had established the possibility of communication. They had ended that isolation for each other. Not to have the refreshment of renewing that bond would take some endurance through the years. He drowned out the 'why' of it which was beating at his brain by shouting it for himself in the echo chamber of the silent ship.

"I believe in mankind ; in form ; in the possibility of organising the environment in a coherent pattern of beauty. I believe in purpose. I believe in purpose until I am not here to believe in anything. I believe in belief as a fact of life."

He was hammering it with clenched fists on the blank panel of the thermal control block hatch.

Consciousness of hands holding him came slowly. From a long way off, a voice, concerned, anxious for him, saying, "Steady now, steady Mr. Bowden. Quietly, *please* Mr. Bowden." Out of the darkness, a face leaning towards him. A nurse, and behind her the white, clinical setting of the therapy ward into which he had been carried from the huge mock-up version of *Cyborax* in the psychometric lab.

Immense relief flooded his mind, consciousness of some great danger averted ; something hardly to be borne no longer threatening him. He remembered now that he had been isolated in the training ship for his last tests. Beyond that he knew nothing.

Senior Controller Wells tapped the folder, lying in front of him on the oval table. "That ties it up then. Training schedules complete for all personnel. Are you ready to give the all clear on this operation?"

There was silence for a long minute. Breaking it, the speaker weighed his words carefully and seemed hesitant. An elderly man, grey, round shouldered, a veteran of many committees and many chairborne enterprises. "The details are very satisfactory, Chairman. Your department

deserves every congratulation. I believe we could give it clearance. One medical report interested me. An engineer, I think. Bowden. Mark Bowden."

He leafed through his pile of documents and fished out the one he wanted. "Here it is. I suppose you are satisfied that this man is quite stable? On his final extended flight simulation session, he was under the illusion that the mechanism had failed in some way."

"That is true, Sir Andrew; but the psychologists were more than satisfied with his reaction to what he believed had happened. You will see that he faced the crisis and decided to go on alone. He was also concerned about the welfare of the other men and particularly about the man who was to relieve him. On the main count, the object of the exercise, as you might say, he behaved with complete reliability. He operated the exchange mechanism twenty-four times without error and went through the drill of making a repair. Nor did he miss one of the routine inspections. No, we are very pleased with Bowden, he will certainly be one of the crew."

"How is his will to undertake the mission affected?"

"Not at all. This investigation was at a very deep level. Almost like a samhadic state of trance. He does not remember anything at all about it."

"How long is the 'samhadic' state maintained?"

"Three days; but subjectively this would appear to be a much longer period. Suggestion was constantly fed in. He would react as if a full year had passed. Each man, of course, has gone through this process. Now they are ready to go."

"How long will that readiness be maintained?"

"Up to six months; but the sooner the better. As you see, I have set a provisional date-line ten days from now. This is what I am asking the committee to approve."

"I realise that, Chairman. However, I still think we should have included some women in the team. Three at least. There is time, on your own admission, to make that adjustment."

"But not to train them," Wells was beginning to feel exasperation building up. This was always the way of it. The only good committee was a committee of two, with one kept away by multiple injuries. He worked hard to

keep his feelings out of his voice and asked flatly, "Are you making a formal proposition on those lines?"

Sir Andrew was too old a debater to be brought to an open challenge before he was ready. He said, "Southern Hemisphere Space Corporation had a similar research project which has not been finalised ; but a great deal of training has gone on. Some of their personnel might be used. It would only postpone matters for a few weeks at most. The gain might be very great."

Wells looked round and recognised, wearily, that the man would make his point. Quick agreement now, and some decision taken would save time in the long run. "Very well, Sir Andrew, if that is what the executive wants, it can certainly be done. Will you leave the choice of personnel to me or do you want a further meeting on that?"

"Those details are your province, Chairman. I, for one, will be quite happy to leave it to you."

In the event, it was eight days only, before the selected additions stepped out of the cooling, inter-continental shuttle. A tender, with one of the project personnel, was waiting to meet them. Tall with a well-shaped, close-cropped head, wide apart grey eyes, which opened with something like puzzled recognition at the first of the newcomers.

She was used to making an impression. Red gold hair swung elastically as she came forward with hand outstretched. "Holland, Dena Holland. This is a wonderful thing. Our own project was cancelled you know. We are privileged to share this venture with you."

Mark Bowden relegated his bewilderment to the ante-rooms of his mind. One thing was for sure, it was like meeting another part of himself. It set a seal of perfection on the mission. Nothing could now keep him out of *Cyborax*. He said simply, "The privilege is all on our side. You are very welcome."

When their hands touched, her eyes told him that the same kind of half recognition was present in her mind. They both knew that this would be a numinous thing for them and that the interlude, which was beginning, was in some way a unique dispensation of special time.

— JOHN RANKINE

A HOT SUMMER'S DAY

by John Bell

The tube train came in, packed as usual. As the doors opened a few people stumbled out and tried to push their way back on again. Inside the carriage there was a general milling around—people trying to push their way out through the packed bodies and scarcely making any progress. At the same time we were trying to push our way on to the train. Girls screamed as they were crushed between those getting on and those fighting their way through to get off. Somewhere to the left of me I heard the sound of tearing cloth—it was usual for someone to end up with their clothes ripped to ribbons after travelling in a rush-hour train. Further up the carriage voices were raised in anger. Arguments and even fights during rush hour travel were becoming more frequent. I expect it was because of the sticky, oppressive heat which was exhausting everyone and fraying everyone's nerves.

A bit more struggling to and fro then the doors closed and we were off—clattering along, crushed into our hot, stuffy carriages like sardines, breathing in fetid air stinking of sweat, treading on one another's toes, digging each other in the ribs with our elbows.

We came to Bethnal Green—more milling; more frayed tempers. Off to Liverpool Street.

We were held up for a couple of minutes by the signals half way along. With the noise and clatter of the train stilled I could hear the ugly sounds of my fellow travellers—angry arguments in various parts of the carriage; the sound of blows being struck, with a plaintive cry of "stop that!" from some woman; girls weeping and one woman screaming hysterically. Somewhere a conversation was going on. This surprised me. Although people used to talk

on the trains during rush hour it was far more usual these days for everyone to travel in tense silence.

At Liverpool Street we were held up for five minutes. The crowds piled up on the platform till it became dangerously packed. Inside the carriage we sweltered and snarled in the heat and the stink and the crush. One woman suddenly clawed her way through and ran out of the carriage screaming in hysterics.

A fight must have broken out on the platform for I saw some policemen worming their way behind the would-be passengers. I was unable to see the actual arrest but I heard the inevitable cry go up.

"Bloody gestapo!"

Everyone took up the cry.

"Gestapo!"

It reverberated through the station; unco-ordinated shouts at first, but then a transformation into a regular, insistent chant.

"Gestapo! Gestapo! Gestapo!"

I saw the policemen making their unsteady and uneven way back to the exit through a barrage of screams, curses and swipes from fists or brief cases or umbrellas. One of them lost his helmet. I wondered if they would make it—a rush hour crowd was an ugly thing to control at the best of times but this summer things were worse than they had ever been and there had been an ominous undertone of violence in the country as a whole. Not that I particularly wanted them to make it—after all, who likes the police?

"For Christ's sake let's get moving again," an edgy, hysterical voice came from inside the carriage.

"You won't get London bleeding Transport to move," a sullen whine came back from the platform.

"We apologise for the delay which has been caused by a passenger being taken ill on the train," the loudspeakers boomed out.

The announcement was greeted with boos and jeers.

People were now pressing against the carriages so much that I thought they would fall on the lines as we moved out.

"Mind the doors," the loudspeakers boomed out again, to the accompaniment of ironic cheers.

So we went on to Bank, where there were massive surges in and out of the train—I nearly lost my briefcase in the mêlée and one of my pockets was torn again. I saw one man get off with his jacket ripped open and blood streaming down his face. St. Paul's, Chancery Lane and Holborn passed and the train began to empty, if one could use the word—it was now as full as a train in the rush hour of ten years ago.

Tottenham Court Road—my station. Limp, exhausted, irritable and soaked with sweat, we streamed off the train and fought our way up the hopelessly overcrowded escalator, out into the street.

There was of course the perennial traffic jam, made worse than usual by the monorail construction work. An utterly immobile mass of cars and taxis and lorries and buses; engines quietly throbbing; hooters blaring discordantly; motorists shouting and cursing at each other; everywhere the stink of petrol fumes. Of course, some idiots had to get out of their cars and start a punch-up—that is the way things are these days. Some policemen were trying to sort things out and were naturally making things worse in the process. All they got for their pains was a shower of well-earned abuse.

Towards the north, beyond Tottenham Court Road, there was a grey pall of smoke—houses burning as a result of the race riots in Camden, Chalk Farm and Kentish Town, the latest of a series of riots that had been smouldering on throughout the summer with increasing violence.

I made my way along the overcrowded pavements to my place of work, one of those twenty-year-old office blocks in one of the side turnings off Oxford Street. By the time I reached my office I was wringing wet with perspiration and felt almost too tired to work. Everyone else looked the same. Susan, one of our typists, was sitting at her desk, quietly sobbing. She was wearing one of those cheap shapeless dresses London Transport issue to women who get their own dresses torn in the crush on the trains.

"You'll be in for it this morning! Mr. Grenville's ulcer is playing up again and on top of that he got caught in a traffic jam for an hour—he was in a filthy temper when he came in," Mike, my fellow computer programmer warned me.

"When isn't he in a filthy temper? I haven't seen him in a good mood for months."

"I don't suppose his divorce helped."

"I wouldn't be surprised if his bad temper caused the divorce," Marianne, our other typist, said sourly, "your jacket pocket is torn by the way, Mr. Bradley. Want me to stitch it up?"

"Er—yes, if you would, please."

"Let's have your jacket then. I ought to be charged overtime for this."

Mr. Grenville slouched out of his office, pallid and sour-faced, rubbing his ulcer-ridden stomach as usual.

"So you're turned up at last, Bradley. Come into my office," he said sharply.

"I told you so!" Mike said, rather smugly.

"He daren't sack me anyway. He'd find it practically impossible to get a replacement. People just don't go for London jobs unless they have to."

I went through to Mr. Grenville's office.

"You're late again!" he snapped at me.

"I know; there were three hold-ups on the District Line, then I had to wait at Mile End for four trains before I could get on—they were so packed, and when I did get a train it was held up twice."

"You should get up earlier to allow for this."

"I did."

"You obviously didn't get up early enough. You haven't been getting in at the right time for months. How do you expect us to run an efficient business when you turn up any time you like?"

"You try getting in on time with the travelling conditions we have these days. You can't move by road and you can't get on the trains, they're so packed. It's all right for people who live in London but when you live twenty miles out it's no joke."

"I live outside London and I can usually get here on time, so you can too. I'll expect you to arrive here a little earlier in future, or there will be trouble—do you understand?"

"Yessir," I said resentfully.

I felt like punching him on the nose and this was only the start of the working day.

Morning coffee break ; by this time the motorists had arrived, hot, dishevelled, exhausted and bad tempered. Mr. Grenville had angrily reprimanded them and that led to an angry argument which ended up with one man giving in his notice. That made Mr. Grenville angrier still, and with everyone's irritability the atmosphere in the office was positively electric.

Round coffee the talk inevitably and obsessively turned to rush hour travelling and, as usual, Mr. Wall, one of our more hot-tempered motorists, set the ball rolling.

". . . Do you know it took me four hours to get from Bayswater to here? We just couldn't move an inch," he griped.

"I heard on my car radio that no traffic is moving at all in the City," another of our motorists added.

"It's all those bloody buses—they ought to take them off the roads. They only block the traffic and they're half empty anyway."

"I'm not surprised—it's quicker to walk these days," Marianne chipped in. "Do you know I overtook four buses walking this morning."

"I wish I were near enough to walk, Marianne," Susan said sombrely. "It's hell on the trains. Honestly, if you want to travel with your clothes in one piece, you'll just have to go in the nude and carry your clothes in a bundle on your head!"

That just about brought the office down. It was the first laugh we'd had this morning. We followed it up with ribald suggestions which made Susan blush deep scarlet.

"It's all very well for you to laugh," she said, "only it's no joke travelling on the trains these days. If animals had to travel the way we do the R.S.P.C.A. would soon put London Transport out of business."

"But you can't expect anything different with everyone trying to get to the same place at the same time on roads and a transport system that just wasn't built for it," Mike countered.

"It wouldn't be so bad if the government got down to do a bit of planning like staggering working hours or

redirecting industry," I retorted, "all they seem to do these days in the House of Commons is to debate phoney no-confidence motions, make phoney points of order, natter endlessly about parliamentary privilege and generally behave like a load of bloody school-kids!"

"That's not fair!" Mike flared up, "the government has been trying to get some planning for the last ten years but they don't get any bloody co-operation from anyone."

"For Christ's sake they're supposed to be a government, aren't they? Why don't they govern?" Mr. Wall exploded.

"There's not much they can do—this isn't a police state, you know."

"And more's the pity! What this country needs is a strong government that's got the guts to make decisions and put them into practice, and never mind what anyone thinks."

"And what about the individual?"

"To hell with the individual! He'll just have to do what he's bloody well told for a change, and if he doesn't—just line him up against a wall and shoot him!"

"You're talking just like those Fascists who are stirring it up in Camden Town."

"Well, I'll admit they're a load of troublemakers but they're right about one thing. Britain's falling apart. Only a strong dictatorship will put it right again."

They were getting so angry they were almost coming to blows.

"But if we had a dictator pushing everyone around, you'd be the first to moan—the way you do about traffic wardens now!" Marianne said cynically.

This relieved the tension, but still, it was a close thing. It was so easy to start a fight these days.

The mercury rose in the thermometer and our tempers rose with it. We were all caught in a vicious circle really; we all arrived at work in a bad mood so we all started making mistakes in our work; the typists made spelling mistakes and copied their shorthand notes incorrectly; Mike and I kept leaving bits out of the computer programmes we were preparing so we had to start all over again. Mr. Grenville fumed at the delay and started

snapping at everyone. This made us more edgy and irritable so we made more mistakes. This made Mr. Grenville angrier so he bawled us out more often, and so it went on.

And the temperature rose higher and higher.

Lunch time. Touching thirty in the shade. Not the dry heat we knew from our holidays in North Africa but a damp, sticky heat that made your clothes stick, sodden, to your body and left you depressed and edgy.

Mike and I decided to go to the Oasis for a swim. A couple of thousand others had the same idea. We took our place in the queue and shuffled along with everyone else to the entrance in a torrent of noise from the now freely moving traffic and from the pneumatic drill at one of the mono-rail sites. After about a quarter of an hour we got in.

It was a relief to get our clothes off and change into trunks. It was also a relief to get into the cool water. But there were the crowds of water everywhere; there were so many people in the water you could not have a clear swim—you just had to weave around all the other swimmers—and when we came out of the water we found hardly any room to sunbathe for about every inch of available space was packed with half naked bodies slowly roasting to a bright pink. After wandering around, carefully stepping over everyone we found a place where we could sit and sun ourselves and look at the girls disporting themselves in their bikinis.

Time passed and Oasis filled up still further. The crowds of people began to get oppressive.

"About time we had lunch," I told Mike.

We went to an overcrowded restaurant and bought limp, bedraggled-looking salads at exorbitant prices. We gulped them down without enjoyment then started walking back to work.

It was like an oven. The sun glared out of a hazy sky and the pavement threw back its heat. We went from shade to shade, avoiding the sunlit parts of the pavement as much as possible. The crowds streamed past us in their usual hurried shuffle, their faces tense, drawn, characterless. The cars hurtled down the road like guided missiles

seeking out their targets. Everywhere there was the dissonant barrage of noise. This was supposed to be our rest period.

We came to the traffic lights at St. Giles Circus. While we waited for them to change so we could get across the road we noticed the newspaper vendors with the midday editions of the evening papers.

"Just look at those headlines!" Mike said bitterly, "doesn't it make you bloody sick!"

"RACE RIOTS RAGE ON IN NORTH LONDON."

"NOW FASCIST STUDENTS JOIN IN."

"LONDON RACE RIOTS—EMERGENCY MEETING FOR CABINET."

"What's come over us? We weren't like this in the past," Mike said. "I'm sure we didn't have this street fighting for days on end, or this house burning, and I don't think any guns were used either."

"Well, there wasn't such a big colour problem in those days—anyway the Fascists have probably stirred things up out of all proportion."

"But the Fascists weren't such an influence when we were young—there weren't these demands for dictatorship or a colour bar then as there are today and university students didn't go in for political extremes like Fascism or Anarchism either."

"There was the C.N.D. and the Committee of 100," I reminded him.

"They were like a Sunday school outing compared with—"

"The light's changed."

We crossed the road.

"Haven't you noticed we're getting coarser and more violent generally?" Mike went on. Once he got started on a pet theme of his he kept going for ages. "It's everywhere—politics, race relations, industrial disputes—it's even spread to football matches. We have to have wire fences and a moat round the pitch like they do in South America. As for holidays, you daren't go to any English resort for fear you'll be set on by a gang of Simbas—and I'm sure the Mods and Rockers of our day weren't as bad as these. They just went for each other and made a nuisance of

themselves generally; they didn't wreck whole shopping centres or beat up innocent holiday makers, or carry molotov cocktails and home-made bombs."

"But isn't that the strain we're living under? The Bomb, the population explosion, the coloured threat, rush hour, the pressure of business, noise, crowds of people everywhere—it isn't surprising people lash out now and then. And when Anarchists advocate smashing everything up and returning to a simpler life, or the Fascists scream for action against the coloureds here and abroad and start saying *Might is Right*, it isn't surprising that some people listen to them."

"Perhaps you're right," he said. He added after a slight pause, "This country is falling apart all round us. We're being stripped of all that's best in us by this rat race we're caught up in and the worst in us is coming out to take its place and the pressures forcing us in this direction are getting worse all the time. We're getting twisted up into one great knot. God knows if we'll be able to sort ourselves out again."

"Perhaps the Fascists have the answer. Perhaps a dictatorship's the only sort of government that can get us out of this mess."

"Doesn't anyone believe in democracy?"

"Democracy's a great idea but we haven't the men or the willpower to make it work. The M.P.s are afraid to govern—they're always looking over their shoulder at the opinion polls or caving in to pressure groups. God knows, I don't like the Fascists but even they would be preferable to what we have at the moment!"

Back at work, hardly refreshed. Everyone was blowing his top and work was suffering. Complaints from the managing director inflamed Mr. Grenville so he took it out on us. Whenever we saw someone lower in the pecking order than us we took it out on them in turn.

Towards tea break, Mr. Grenville called Susan in to complain about her typing. We heard angry voices from his office. Susan came out again in tears.

"I've had enough!" she announced, "I'm handing in my notice. You get squashed to death on the tube every morning and when you get here the boss starts swearing at you. I'm not going to put up with it any longer."

We often had these crises. We all rallied round to calm her down.

"Look, we're all tired and irritable because it's a hot day," I told her. "Don't rush things; just sleep on it." That was a laugh; you would be lucky to get any sleep in this heat. "I've often felt like handing in my notice, then I went home and had a good night's sleep and felt differently about it next morning. You'll find working conditions are pretty much the same all over London and if you get a job outside London you won't get half the money you can earn here."

"Perhaps I won't get as much money outside London but I won't have such bad working conditions either. Money isn't everything and the extra you earn here isn't worth having if it means being pushed around and shouted at the way we are. It's more than flesh and blood can stand—we wouldn't let animals be treated the way we are."

"Don't you think we all feel this way at times? Life in a big city is pretty awful but we just have to put up with it—there's nothing we can do about it. Go home and think things over carefully before you hand in your notice."

"Do you know I'm too scared to go home on the tube tonight. I got my dress ripped off this morning—I might get trampled underfoot next."

"Look, you catch the Central Line from Tottenham Court Road, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then Mike and I can go with you as far as the station and I can stay with you till Mile End if that will make you feel any happier."

Half past five. Blessed relief from the electric atmosphere of the office. Susan, Mike and I cleared out as fast as we could.

Into the streets. Heat, noise, petrol fumes, diesel fumes, traffic, people, and a mounting tension that set every nerve in your body jangling. In Oxford Street the traffic was crawling bumper to bumper. The crowds on the pavements pushed and shoved and swore; a seething mass of hate-filled, harassed, dehumanised men and women.

When we got to Tottenham Court Road station we found hordes of people milling round the entrances and spilling out on to the roads.

"Oh God—we don't have to go through that lot do we?" Susan said in dismay.

"The only alternative is to walk."

We joined the fringe of the crowd round the entrance on the west side of Tottenham Court Road.

"What's happening now?" I called out.

"They've closed the station, I think," someone in the crowd answered.

They were often doing that during the rush hour to stop people piling up on the platforms too much. We fretted and fumed in the still oppressive heat. I felt the tension building up in me as it had been doing all day. I sensed the irritation and the anger pouring out of everyone around me with their sweat.

The gates of the Oxford Street entrance were open to let people leave the station. There was only one policeman to keep people from going in. Usually there were more but I suppose most of the police were up Camden way controlling the race riots. Suddenly the crowd surged forward. The policeman's helmet disappeared from view. Everyone started pouring into the Oxford Street entrance.

"They've opened the station again," someone round our entrance called out.

"About time, too!" came the inevitable blustering retort.

"I don't think they have—I think the people are pushing in," Mike said more cautiously, but his voice did not carry very far.

We stood and waited round our entrance, sweltering.

"Why don't they open the gates?" a woman's voice rose shrilly.

"We've got to get home tonight," another voice cut in irritably.

A group of Simbas started bawling out the chorus of "Why are we waiting?" The whole crowd took it up.

Both Mike and Susan were looking rather apprehensive by this time.

"They're getting in all right across the road!" one pimply faced teenager near us shouted.

A whole mass of people rushed across the road just as the traffic lights were changing to green. There was a sudden squealing of brakes as the cars which had just started to move forward had to stop. The motorists sounded their horns and leaned out of their car windows to scream abuse at the crowds who were now streaming across the road in defiance of the traffic lights.

Traffic in Tottenham Court Road and Charing Cross Road was stopped by the traffic lights. Some cars had got across from New Oxford Street but were now stopped by the swarming crowds. All the makings of a first-class traffic jam. Within minutes, the streets were clogged with immobile ribbons of cars and buses and taxis as far as the eye could see.

People were now surging into the Oxford Street entrance from every direction, aggressively thrusting themselves forward and elbowing everyone else out of the way. Inevitably some of them got caught up in violent squabbles which led by degrees to fist fights. A couple of Simbas took the general confusion as a golden opportunity to make trouble. They overturned a newsvendor's stall.

"I don't like the way things are going," Susan said apprehensively, "let's walk on to Holborn."

"I have to stay here for the Northern Line," Mike said.

"I expect the crowds will be as bad at Holborn anyway. A lot of the City workers walk up to Holborn to try and get on the trains before they fill up too much. Anyway even if things do get a bit rough, I don't suppose it will go as far as an actual riot," I tried to reassure Susan. "This is England, not an African banana republic."

But the people round our entrance were getting restive.

"They've getting in across the road; why don't they open up here?" came one querulous whine from near where we were standing.

"Come on! Open up!" one young man by the gates howled, shaking the gates.

"We want to get home tonight!"

We had heard that voice before but now it had a sharper edge to it.

"Open up! Open up!"

The Simbas who had started the "Why are we waiting?" chorus were now rhythmically chanting.

"Open up! Open up! Open up!"

More and more people joined in.

"Open up! Open up! Open up!"

It reminded me of those news films of Fascist student rallies. The chant had an insistent rhythm that reverberated through the mind.

"Open up! Open up! Open up!"

Person after person took up the cry. It poured into my ears from all around me. It seemed to ring inside my head. I may even have started chanting myself—I just don't know.

Susan clawed at my arm and said tearfully, "Please let's get out of here. I'm frightened."

"I think we'd better," Mike added gravely.

We tried to push our way out of the crowd.

"Watch where you're going!" a beefy-looking man with a fleshy, brutish, face threatened us.

"You watch it yourself," I snapped back.

"Don't get in any fights please!" Susan wailed.

Mike held me back with his arm across my chest.

"Careful," he cautioned me, "we can't risk anything with Susan around!"

I backed away but I could feel myself quivering with rage.

"It doesn't look as if we'll be able to get away too easily, does it?" Mike said grimly.

I looked at the sullen, hate-filled faces around me.

"No."

So we stayed with the crowd.

"Here come the police!" someone shouted.

There were boos and whistles and howls of execration which turned to screams of pain and outrage as the policemen waded into the crowd with their truncheons flailing. I suppose they had just come back from fighting race rioters and were tired and edgy and even more brutal than usual as a result, but they really roused the crowd to anger at the worst possible time.

"Watch who you're hitting!"

"Get your hands off me, you bastards!"

"Gestapo!"

The inevitable abuse; inarticulate screams of rage.

"Assert your humanity! Smash the forces of law and

tyranny! Smash the machines! Smash everything and free yourselves!"

This from a little knot of Anarchist students that had just ambled up from the direction of Charing Cross Road. From the iron bars and half bricks they were carrying it looked as if they were going to do battle with their Fascist fellow-students. Now they had found a more immediate cause to fight for—us.

"Are you mice or men?" one Anarchist girl stridently bawled at us. "Free yourselves! Smash everything!"

"Let's get those bloody gates open!" an equally strident cry came back from the middle of the mob.

"Get the cops!"

"Free yourselves!"

"Open up the station and let's get home!"

"Gestapo!"

"Get the cops!"

"Are you mice or men?"

"Smash everything!"

"Let's break into the station!"

The angry shouts of the crowd mingled with the oversimplified slogans of the Anarchists and fused with a crazy logic that answered to something that was welling up from deep inside us.

"Smash everything!" the Simbas took up the Anarchist slogan.

"Get the cops!"

A look of horrified amazement spread over Mike's face. He stood for a moment, all tensed up, then he shrieked out at the top of his voice, "Stop all this you idiots! Do you want a blood bath or something?"

"Yes! We want a blood bath!" one of the Anarchists bawled back. "We want to smash and destroy so we can rebuild a better world!"

"We want a blood bath!" the crowd mindlessly took up the cry.

"NO!" Mike howled despairingly.

"Shut up or I'll smash your teeth in!" someone nearby snarled at him.

"Don't get us mixed up in this!" Susan begged tearfully.

But we already were. A mindless fury was raging

through the crowd, leaping from man to man like the flames of a forest fire. I felt it communicating itself to me, absorbing me into itself. I felt something dark and violent bubbling up inside me and coming closer to the surface.

"Free yourselves!"

"Smash everything!"

"Get the cops!"

"We want a blood bath!"

Shout answered shout; slogan answered slogan.

Car hooters blared out in discordant blasts that smashed brutally through our heads in a savage counterpoint to the shouting.

"Stop that bloody row!" someone on the edge of the pavement bellowed at the motorists.

"Belt up!" someone else followed suit.

"Get the motorists!" the Simbas started shouting.

"Get the cops!"

"GET THE WHOLE BLOODY LOT!"

The mob surged forward angrily. The policemen were swamped. One of them was sent crashing through a plate-glass window.

A feral roar broke out from the throats of the crowd. Ingrained inhibitions, well bred civilized conventions, respect for law, family ties and friendships—all were forgotten. There was one feeling—anger; one urge—to destroy.

Mike grabbed me by my shoulders and shouted, "For God's sake don't get involved in this!"

I shook him off. He lurched back into the arms of one of the mob.

"Don't go bumping into me like that!" he said and hit Mike heavily on the side of his head.

Almost automatically, Mike hit him back. This triggered off a general free for all which swallowed them up.

Susan screamed in terror and tried to claw her way out of the crowd. I caught one brief glimpse of her deathly white, tear-streaked face and her fear-widened eyes as she was jostled by the milling crowds, then she tripped and fell and was trampled underfoot.

One last glimmer of sanity made me try to fight my way

through to her but the crowd was pushing in the opposite direction. It swept me up with it. Its savage blood lust swept through me and possessed me completely.

I cannot clearly remember what happened past this point; my normal faculties seemed to have been completely swamped by the boiling rage and savage exultation that possessed and drove me. I have general impressions; the crash of breaking glass; the screams, the roars, the jeers; the blood and torn flesh; the ripped clothes; the kicking and punching and gouging and jabbing, the relish and the satisfaction there was in doing it; the cars overturned and set on fire; the pulverised windcreens; the dull crump of exploding petrol tanks; the sudden bursts of lurid flame; the tiny windscreen fragments frosting the gutters; the bloodstained spears of plate glass littering the pavement; the window displays spilling out of the shattered shop fronts; the insane looting and wrecking.

Some incidents stick out more sharply in my mind amidst the general impressions:

People belching out of the tube station with torn clothes and blood streaming from great gashes in their heads, frantically clawing their way through the people trying to get in.

Shoppers dropping their bags and running away in terror. Rioters pouncing on them, hitting them, tearing at their hair and clothes, throwing them to the ground, kicking them around like a football.

A sudden brief glimpse of Mike through a gap in the crowd that soon closed up again. He was holding another man against a wall, pummelling him with a mindless, frenzied ferocity that showed that he too had finally succumbed to the mob spirit.

An Anarchist girl climbing on to the roof of a car to harangue the crowd; the chorus of boos and jeers that greeted her; the cry of "Get that troublemaker;" from the mob; everyone surging forwards; her bewildered cry of "But I'm on your side!" just before they climbed up on to the car to pull her down.

A terrified motorist struggling to get clear of his car and to merge with the crowd. A dozen hands clutching at his clothes; fists crashing into his face, then, as he fell, the kicks in the groin, in the belly, in the face, then the heels

crashing down until all that was left was a bloody carcass unrecognisable as a human being.

A young man reeling away from a burning car with his clothes alight, thrusting his way erratically through the milling crowds, crashing through a dress shop window, setting the window display alight; people scattering as their clothes caught fire.

The man in uniform I killed with a shovel I must have picked up from one of the monorail pylon sites. I cannot remember whether he was a policeman, a traffic warden, a busman, a Fascist or a soldier.

A group of Simbas throwing molotov cocktails from the scaffolding on a monorail pylon site.

Desks and chairs and typewriters hurtling through the windows of an office block. Papers fluttering down like confetti.

A little rat faced man in the window of a camera shop grabbing just about every camera and accessory he could lay his hands on. He already had about twenty cameras strapped round his shoulders.

The Irish labourers grouped round the monorail pylon where they had been working, gleefully lashing out with crowbars and shovels and picks and anything else that came to hand.

The stranded bus burning with passengers still in it, struggling to get to the door or to break out through the windows.

The scene at Marble Arch. People had started rioting there themselves before we had swept up Oxford Street—it looked as if we had triggered off fighting all over the place. They had swept down on the immobilised cars and had fired them. The whole road was now a lake of burning petrol. People were seething round the flames like ants whose nest had been smashed. The entrances to the subways were crammed with struggling men and women trying to force their way through to the safety of Hyde Park.

I hacked my way through the crowds with the shovel, pushed on by the relentless pressure of the people behind me. I stumbled round the inferno, slipping over the piled up bodies on the pavement, through into Bayswater Road.

Other rioters had gone before. They had smashed up

cars and set light to them, and had broken into houses and had thrown furniture out of the window. Smoke was now billowing from some of the houses.

Fires were breaking out all over the place now. Looking back, I could see columns of flame and smoke rising in Oxford Street, Mayfair and Portland Place. In Hyde Park patches of dry grass were beginning to smoulder as sparks landed on them from the burning cars.

I could not get any further along Bayswater Road. The pavement was blocked with smashed furniture, with mono-rail pylon workings and with knots of struggling, squabbling people. I weaved my way through the litter of wrecked cars across the road to Hyde Park. Others were also making their way into Hyde Park and drifting across to the Serpentine; grimly exultant rioters with torn, grimy, bloodstained clothes, swaggering, insolent-looking Simbas; people who had been caught up in the rioting, taut, pale-faced; children with tear-stained cheeks. We trudged over dry dusty grass littered with broken deck chairs, torn newspapers and articles of clothing I suppose had been abandoned by sunbathers fleeing the rioters.

We reached the banks of the Serpentine.

More people drifting by; now we were joined by bewildered tourists and by frightened-looking sunbathers still in their bathing costumes. The bridge was crammed with a seething mass of people struggling to get across. They pushed their way to and fro and every so often, someone would tumble over the parapet into the Serpentine. There were more mobs round the lido and the cafeteria and the whole of the bathing area was a mass of bobbing heads. I could see people in the water outside the bathing area, too, threshing about, trying to keep afloat, or clinging to upturned boats.

I went along the footpath under the bridge, which did not seem to be so crowded.

Conditions on the other side of the bridge were, if anything, worse. There were masses of refugees from the race riots in Paddington; dusky, dingy-looking men, women and children clutching pathetic little bundles; Simbas pelting them with bricks and bottles, weed-killer bombs and molotov cocktails, their black counterparts answering back with roughly the same choice of weapons, an

occasional predatory pack of Fascists, grey uniformed and carrying an odd assortment of obsolescent firearms.

Kensington Gardens were black with people. Army helicopters were hovering round Kensington Palace and more helicopters were flying in from the west. To the south there was a continual rattle of small arms fire punctuated by an occasional explosion.

There was a puff of white vapour over by Kensington Palace, then another. Within minutes the whole of Kensington Gardens was obscured by a white fog that clung to the ground. People reeled from it erratically, as if they had been blinded.

A helicopter rattled over the Serpentine. Some canisters dropped from it. More bursts of vapour; choking; burning into the eyes and making them water.

"Tear gas!"

Everyone blundered around; collided with each other in a blurred, watery world, coughing and spluttering. Somehow I managed to break out of the choking clouds of tear gas and make my way back to the other side of the bridge.

More people had piled up on the banks of the Serpentine, and still more were joining them, driven by the tear gas attacks, or by the fires that were now raging to the north and east of us, from Bayswater to Park Lane.

The separate fires now seemed to be joining up into one big fire storm and thick black clouds of smoke were billowing up and darkening the eastern sky. Showers of red and orange sparks shot up in the rising columns of heated air and rained down into the park. The grass, tinder dry from the heat wave, caught fire from them. The fires began to spread in the park itself.

Waves of panic swept over us, washing away the savage exultation that we had felt during the rioting. We fought our way up to the bridge. I frantically hacked out at everyone around me with my shovel to cleave a way through the packed, milling mass of people. I saw them fall away in front of me; I felt their bodies underfoot.

The other side of the bridge. More people milling round; streaming in from Kensington Gardens and Knightsbridge. The cafeteria blazing; the grass round it blazing; the lido blazing; the Serpentine black with bobbing heads.

Fires were springing up all round us now. On both sides

of the Serpentine grass and trees were blazing. Smoke was now rising from Knigtstbridge. I could hear above the howling of the mob sounds of gunfire from Knightsbridge and Kensington Gardens, and the helicopters droning away overhead.

The gunfire got closer.

We were now packed in together like a herd of frightened sheep. Rumours spread among us like wildfire.

"War's broken out!"

"They're trying to get tanks through but they're held up by traffic jams."

"The Blacks are throwing bombs everywhere."

"They've got a whole arsenal of guns sent over specially from Africa."

"They've got troops in Knightsbridge—they're shooting at anyone on sight."

"They've given guns to the police."

"They've dropped the Bomb."

"The troops are using their bayonets."

"They're using poison gas."

"The Jews are arming the Blacks."

"They're going to bomb us."

A helicopter bumbled overhead. More canisters of tear gas tumbled down into the thickly packed crowds.

"Poison gas! Get out quick!"

Some rushed back to the bridge to meet with the crowds escaping from the tear gas and the fires on the other side in one tight, immovable mass of struggling bodies; some plunged blindly into the Serpentine; some, like myself struck out south to Kensington Road.

I stumbled over some fallen bodies and fell flat on my face. I lay there for a moment, coughing and spluttering, eyes streaming, then as my eyes began to clear, I raised my head and looked round.

Soldiers coming. I flopped down again, hoping to pass myself off as yet another corpse—there was enough blood on my clothes to make it look authentic. I watched the soldiers out of the corner of my eye. There was a small patrol, gasmasked and armed with automatic rifles. They went round, dispersing any large group they saw by firing over their heads, and rounding up smaller knots of people. They had got about a hundred people together when the

officer in charge of them gesticulated at the spreading fires and motioned them to go back. They marched off with their prisoners.

I waited till they were out of sight then cautiously raised my head again and looked round.

Fires breaking out in all directions; people scurrying everywhere in wild confusion. The park was rapidly becoming a death trap.

A red-hot cinder fell on my arm. The pain triggered off a wave of blind panic. I pulled myself to my feet and stumbled through the trees, completely forgetting the troops in my headlong flight from the park.

Kensington Road; row upon row of stalled cars, shimmering in the heat; people streaming along the pavement westwards, in a dazed, almost trance-like state; one or two armed policemen caught up in the moving stream; troops, marching in an orderly column, westwards; groups of army engineers standing round the houses with bundles of explosives.

Away from the fires, my panic subsided. No other feeling took its place, only waves of tiredness and lethargy following on the orgiastic frenzy of the riot. I drifted into the crowds and shuffled along with them with no more volition than a piece of driftwood swept along by a river.

We came across tanks in Kensington High Street. It looked as if they had been trying to break through to the trouble spots, as rumour suggested, but had been held up by the immobilised traffic. Cars battered into crumpled, tortured shapes and piled up, one on top of the other, marked their attempt to smash their way through. Now they were lumbering round, ripping up the asphalt with their treads and joining the general exodus, westwards.

There were fire engines too, engulfed in the immobile stream of cars and buses, and abandoned.

Flights of helicopters droned overhead, westwards.

There was no rioting or looting now, no inflammatory slogans, no police or troop action to restore order. The orgy of violence against a hateful strain-filled existence was over. The accumulated poisons of frustration and anger had been purged from our systems. Now we were

played out. Drained of lust to fight and destroy, drained of fear, drained of everything, we shuffled along the crowded pavements and between the abandoned cars in silence; dull automata mechanically following everyone else. We had nothing to say; we had no thought or feeling for family, friends or workmates; we hardly noticed who was walking next to us.

Our dehumanisation was complete.

Behind us the fires ate up London. They blazed unchecked. As the fire brigades could not get through the choked roads to fight the fires, the army tried to stop them spreading by blowing up houses—we could hear the explosions all round us—but the blocked roads and the swarming masses of people fleeing from the advancing flames hampered their movements so badly that in the end they had to withdraw.

The blaze went on for days, spreading through the strangled city. The whole fabric of city life crumpled before it. People fled before the flames as animals would before a forest fire, tramping through the streets day and night, till the weaker ones collapsed by the wayside and the stronger ones reached open country.

When there was nothing more for them to feed on, the fires died down. By that time all that was left of London were piles of smouldering rubble.

— JOHN BELL

THE REPORT

by Russell Parker

The Prime Minister of India sat at his desk in New Delhi. It was a July afternoon, made bearable only by the electric fans which whirled above him unobtrusively. The Prime Minister sighed, and took a turn up and down his room. He stopped against the window which looked out on the lawns to the East. With his right elbow cupped in his left hand, and his right hand tapping his chin rhythmically in a characteristic posture, he looked out over the sunlit view.

He sighed again and walked slowly back to his desk. He looked down at the envelope lying before him, bearing the superscription "PRIVATE AND PERSONAL". The P.M. guessed that it contained Professor Mukkerjee's report. He appeared reluctant to open it.

He leaned back in his chair, and let his gaze rise to the level of a rotating fan. How long ago had it all started? Twelve, thirteen months and three days. . . . That short time ago the world had been relatively uncontaminated. It seemed incredible, as he looked through the window to the still, peaceful scene outside that not much more than year ago there had been cities called London, New York, Moscow, Paris, Berlin, Peking, Tokyo, San Francisco and Dnepropetrovsk. That a short time ago the U.S.A., Great Britain, the U.S.S.R., France, Germany, Japan had been great and powerful states, ruled by powerful statesmen. Powerful, and yet powerless. For the sand had been running out. . . .

The Prime Minister lit a cigarette.

He stretched his long legs to their fullest extent under his desk, and sucked the smoke into his lungs. June 10th had been the day; it had dawned as any other since the beginning of the world, but it had been totally different. This had been such a day as had never been seen before, and perhaps would never be seen again. For on that day, man had commenced to destroy himself.

It was quite clear that the first blow had fallen on Norfolk. Well, given that War was starting, he supposed that that part of Eastern England could be considered a worth-while target, considering the presence of American bomber squadrons. The P.M. seemed to remember protest marchers being jailed some years back, when the bombers first went there. He laughed without humour. . . . Not much good the marchers had done. They were dead now, and so were the non-marchers, and the police, and those who had jeered and those who had applauded; all gone, "in one red burial blent". Byron had said it all over a hundred years ago. The Prime Minister was Harrow-trained but he knew his English poets.

He looked again at the envelope and wondered if Mukkerjee had found any signs of life on the island at all. . . .

Yes, the bomb on Norfolk had been the start of the whole affair. The explosion had been registered all over the world. And what a bomb it must have been! Certainly no other bomb that fell had equalled it. The Russians had invented the King of Weapons. Hadn't Krushchev boasted as much, when he was in power? And it had turned out to be no idle boast.

And yet, in a way, the bomb on Norfolk had been the end, not the start, of the affair. Tension had been building up. The *détente* between the two nuclear giants had been replaced by growing estangement. Breaking point had been getting nearer and nearer. Both sides were jittery, scared, trigger-happy. And the more frightened they became, the more belligerent were the challenges and counter-challenges. . . .

The Norfolk challenge had been accepted—and promptly. Within an hour Warsaw had become a crater, lined with radio-active dust and debris. Then Washington, D.C., had ceased to exist. Moscow had followed inevitably. And so on. And so on. Tensions—terrific, unbearable tensions—released suddenly in a gigantic spasm of terrified reflexes, caused destruction such as mankind had never before seen.

In three days it had all been over. . . . East and West the bombs had fallen. And some had gone North and South. . . . The stratosphere had swarmed with atomic

warheads sweeping in beautiful parabolic curves to devastating impact as the world went mad. Some had even fallen on neutral, Indian soil. And then, silence. And radio-active dust, and Geiger counters chattering away merrily, telling a tale of horror in the parts of the world which had "escaped".

The Prime Minister made an impatient gesture, picked up a paper knife and slit the envelope which was marked "PRIVATE AND PERSONAL".

Of course, no country had escaped. Some had had a quick—perhaps a merciful?—death. The others now awaited a lingering one. In spite of the July heat, in spite of the whirring fans, the P.M. shuddered and felt cold.

He drew out the fat report, neatly typewritten. He knew Mukkerjee would have been thorough, and that what was written here could be taken on trust. It was natural that India should have sent a party to Britain. Two hundred years of association between Britain and India, although not always on a friendly basis, had left ties not easily severed. Although they were severed now, and finally.

Yes, Mukkerjee could be relied on. He was in hospital now. It was doubtful if his life could be prolonged as long as another week. All the precautions he had taken had been insufficient to protect him from the frightful contamination that enveloped Britain. He had known the risk when he had accepted the mission, but he was not the man to shirk risks. . . .

The P.M. stubbed out his cigarette, and turned to the first page.

"What follows," he read, "will, I think, substantiate my conclusions. All the evidence on the spot points to the fact that Norfolk was not destroyed by a hydrogen bomb. It was undoubtedly struck on June 10th last year by the largest meteorite that has hit the earth in historical times. . . ."

The Prime Minister stopped reading. The electric fans whirled unobtrusively. . . .

—RUSSELL PARKER

HURRY DOWN SUNSHINE

by Roger Jones

"Hurry up engine, hurry up train,
Casey's gonna ride the road again ;
Swift as lightnin', smooth as glass ;
Feller, take yo' hat off when the Train go past."
(from: *The Ballad of Casey Jones*)

ONE: DOORS AND WINDOWS.

Another day. If there had been a bird it would have been singing. Smith stepped out of the lift on the umpteenth floor and looked about him. Not a bird anywhere. Only the usual corridor, silent, empty.

On either hand stretched the long lines of doors, arranged with perfect symmetry. The ends of the corridor were barely visible to the naked eye and it is no exaggeration to say the doors were many.

His brisk nine o'clock steps sounded very loud on the dusty red-tiled floor. He hummed a little tune as he went and whenever he hit a certain note, the whole corridor hummed in sympathy.

He stopped before the door which bore his name on a printed card in a little brass frame: Smith was secretly proud to have a nominative-index as low as 27. It made up for the (admitted) vulgarity of the name itself. He liked having his own name on his own door. Once a week he polished the frame which held the card.

He went in. It was a small room and contained no furniture beyond the regulation minimum: (1) a large, flat-topped wooden desk with drawers under ; (2) swivel chair upholstered in green plastic ; (3) wastebasket ; (4) a small, rather functional peg for hat and coat. Once, some

years back, Smith had indented for a second peg, but nothing had come of it.

The chair, and consequently the desk, faced the door. Behind the desk was a wall taken up by a disproportionately large window. The others walls were bare. The floor was quite bare, red-tiled like the corridor.

Smith crossed to the window and looked out at the street so far below; then to his chair and sat down for a second; then again to the door, hung up his coat with his left hand, closed the door softly (yesterday it was noisily, he remembered), hung up his coat (both hands), walked round the desk to the chair again and sat down.

This ritual of arrival should not be mistaken for mere routine. The predictable and monotonous were anathema to 14-9-67-SMITH/27. The actions itemised above were never performed in the same order or in the same way on two successive days. In fact, the number of possible permutations was enormous and Smith carried a complete list of them in his head, together with a detailed scheme for their day-to-day application.

In this, as in everything else pertaining to his job, he was serious, reliable, devoted, scrupulous, thoughtful and thorough. Daily from nine to five he applied himself to his duties with real zeal. The scheduled breaks for coffee, lunch and tea he ignored. The statement that he worked from nine to five was absolutely true and this gave him considerable inner satisfaction. That's the kind of man he was.

Smith's unswerving resolve to subordinate semantics to truth made him a regular beacon in an untidy and mendacious world.

Comfortably installed, he addressed himself to his work. On his desk there were, reading from left to right:

- a tray containing a pile of letters for attention;
- a typewriter in a black plastic shroud;
- a tray to receive the letters after attention.

He looked at the letters for a few moments. He picked up the pile in both hands and considered them thoughtfully *en masse*, leaning both elbows on the desk for steadiness.

It was about seven minutes past nine. Outside, the sun was shining. Birds, established at different vantage points

up and down the country, were singing. In Manchester, Heckmondwike, Birmingham, Bletchley, Andover, Tong, Pontardawlais and South Uist hundreds of people looked up at the sky and murmured, "It is good to be alive."

Smith imagined himself getting up, walking to the window with the letters, opening the window, throwing the letters out, and then watching them flutter down. He would lean after them, waving and shouting, "TICKERTAPE! TICKERTAPE!"

He remained seated only because the window was of the kind that are not made to be opened.

He envisaged throwing the letters into the wastebasket. This scheme had several advantages: it was quick and easy; it could be accompanied by a number of brusque and determined gestures copied from the cinema and pleasing to natural vanity; above all, it would emphatically demonstrate the Utility Of The WasteBasket. But he rejected it, judging that these assets would be outweighed by the continuing and reproachful presence of the letters under his nose. It was vital that they should not merely be disposed of, but that they should have never existed.

In the end he settled the problem in a manner which had the dual beauties of simplicity and finality: he merely summoned his secretary from the outer office and handed her the letters, saying in mild but authoritative tones, "Please take these away and deal with them, Miss Rottgarten." At the same time he put the letters in an empty drawer which he then locked. He kept one back, placing it in the OUT tray as proof and symbol of attention given.

Then he took the cover from the typewriter, put in a sheet of paper, and began to write.

* * *

TWO: a.m./P.M.

Imagine a long thin room containing the Prime Minister. The only other furniture a long thin table with chairs down either side. At the head of the table another, rather throne-ish chair with arms and a high back, beautifully carved. The walls and doors panelled in oak. Gloomy

portraits of the Illustrious Dead looking down impossibly long noses from heavy gilt frames. Plush curtains. Rich, red, soundproof carpeting. The general effect calm, tasteful, and expensive—a taxpayers' money's-worth.

The Prime Minister stood by the window, peered nervously at Downing Street. His left hand picked intermittently at the knot of his tie. He glanced at his watch. It was just after nine. He wore a nicely-cut dark grey suit and brown felt bedroom slippers.

Absently, he belched and then looked guiltily over his shoulder. He hadn't yet had breakfast. After a bit he left the window and shuffled over to the important-looking chair, climbed into it and began to fumble through a pile of scruffy papers which lay on the table in front of him.

A door opened and a man came in. Behind him, another man. The first man said loudly: "Good morning then. Haven't kept you waiting, I hope." He had a thick Yorkshire accent; his tone was jovial, domineering and insincere. The Prime Minister winced. The second man said nothing. The two men sat down, one on either side of the table, at the end furthest from the throne.

The Prime Minister cleared his throat, said, "Hem-hem, good-morning," and waited. His voice was high and reedy and his accent so upper-class as to have a burlesque quality.

The Yorkshireman sprawled fatly in his chair, smiling a fat smile. His companion unzipped a bulging briefcase and began sorting through its contents. His hands were long, white, and well-kept; the movements of his fingers rapid and precise. The Prime Minister glanced shiftily from one to the other of the newcomers. The loud one was Sir Herman Kelly, Minister of Transport; the other was Dr. Holzhacker.

The Prime Minister hated them both.

Dr. Holzhacker was Director of the Bureau of Social Statistics and not officially a member of the Cabinet. He was a small, thin, unobtrusive person. His hair was greyish, cut close. He had a small, greyish moustache. He wore round, rimless glasses and could use their glinting properties with terrible effect. The Prime Minister feared Dr. Holzhacker even more than he hated him. But he kept his feelings to himself.

It was an open secret that Dr. Holzhacker and his department constituted the real seat of power in the country. All planning and all administrative decision-making, whether economic, military or diplomatic, was done either by, or under the supervision of, the Bureau of Social Statistics. The reason was simple: without Information there can be no Planning, and without Planning there can be no Government; and the Bureau had the Information, all of it. Sometimes the Prime Minister, privately and wistfully, thought about the good old days of Palmerston and gunboats. . . .

Dr. Holzhacker looked up from his papers, now in neat piles on the table. "We are all here?" he said. It was not really a question. He turned to the Prime Minister, apparently seeing him for the first time. "I suppose you know why we called you here?"

"Why, yes, I think so, hem-hem."

"It is about the plans for Scapegoat," continued Dr. Holzhacker, without pausing to give ear to the Prime Minister's reply. "They are finalised."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Prime Minister, trying to look well-informed. "Ah! Scapegoat."

"Scaapegooot," said Sir Herman, giving the diphthongs the full treatment.

The Prime Minister, uncertain whether he was expected to speak, and if so what, waited for enlightenment. As a displacement activity he produced a large cigar which someone had given him and lit it with the band on.

Dr. Holzhacker's long white fingers drummed on the table. "You are obviously at sea, sir," he said snappishly. "Sir Herman, perhaps you would be good enough to put the Prime Minister in the picture?"

"Why, certainly, brother Holzhacker," responded the jovial Sir Herman. "And in return perhaps our noble leader,"—he turned, smiling, to the figure at the head of the table now almost hidden in a thick cloud of nasty-smelling smoke—"would be good enough to save his childish and anti-social gimmicks for the bloody voters?"

A hasty apology came from within the cloud and a hand holding a cigar emerged and scrabbled feebly round for an ashtray.

Sir Herman waited until the cigar was out and the Prime

Minister had returned to normal visibility. The smile never left his face.

* * *

THREE: ROOTS.

"... In the latter half of the Twentieth Century, Centralised Statistical Planning was still in its first infancy. Curiously enough, it was in the field of penal reform that the new system first showed its vast potential as a means of controlling and directing social change.

"At this time, growing unease at the antiquated brutality of the old eye-for-an-eye legal system, coinciding with spectacular advances in social psychology, came to a head in the incident known as the Philpotts Scandal.

"The details of this ludicrous and sordid affair need not detain us. Suffice it to say that evidence came to light of corruption on a gigantic scale in the legal limb of the body social. Among those involved were the Home Secretary, the Assistant Commissioner for Scotland Yard, fourteen Chief Constables, three High Court Judges and, inevitably, an unspecified number of Bishops. The gutter press in its self-appointed role as guardian of the nation's morals, had a field-day. The public boiled. Slander and innuendo stalked the streets. The Government tottered. The whole Parliamentary system found itself in jeopardy. The public's disgust with its leaders reached such a point that many members of the Establishment went in fear of their lives. One unfortunate, a certain Edward E. Watts, a respected member of the legal profession whose only crime was that he was a friend of the abominable Philpotts, was actually torn to pieces by the mob while walking his dog in Hyde Park.

"This was the moment chosen by a splinter-group of liberal M.P.'s—backed, it is said by the sinister Dr. Holzacker, *éminence grise* of the period—to force through the famous "Six Months Bill". This amazing piece of legislation made it obligatory for all judges, magistrates, prison governors and senior police officials to spend six months a year undergoing "hard labour" in a penal institution. The same bill enacted that no less than 12% of the gross

national income should be set aside annually to finance research into the causes and cure of anti-social behaviour patterns.

"These somewhat drastic measures were not long without effect. Within three years the prisons had disappeared. By the end of ten years, crime as such no longer existed.

Of course, there still remained a number of difficulties to be ironed out, or—to use an idiom much in vogue at the time—'normalised'. . . ."

(from: "Statistical Planning—A History of Modern Social Organisation" by Watkins and Ware, London 2034.)

* * *

FOUR: THE WHATNOTS OF POWER.

The Prime Minister listened with rather less than half an ear to the Transport Minister's exposition. His stomach was beginning to rumble loudly. He decided to assert himself.

"Listen," he said, taking advantage of a pause in the flow of Northern bombast occasioned by Sir Herman's stopping to blow his nose, "why don't you both come down to my place one weekend and we'll talk the whole thing over, maybe get in a little fishin'? Harrum, harrum. What do you say, Kelly?"

"Come, come, P.M.," rumbled Sir Herman chidingly as he leisurely stuffed away a huge red silk handkerchief. "This needn't take a minute. It's just that we want you to be in the picture a little before you sign anything. You wouldn't want us doing anything behind your back now, would you?" He smiled ponderously at his own joke. The Prime Minister shuffled but said nothing. "You see," he went on, "some time ago our Dr. Holzhacker here came to me with a very interesting problem. Very interesting indeed. It seems his lads had turned up some data—psychological, you might say—about this crime thing. It's all a bit above my head really. Perhaps you'd better explain it, Holzhacker. I'm not very strong on all this scientific stuff."

Dr. Holzhacker terminated a very careful inspection of his very white hands. He began to speak with the brisk condescension of an army officer explaining an unusually meaningless manoeuvre to a platoon of cretins. "You are doubtless aware, sir, that over the past six months the Mental Stability Index has shown a sudden and alarming decline, while over the same period the Social Deviation Norms have risen correspondingly—in some areas by as much as point nine per cent."

The Prime Minister was aware of nothing of the sort. It was all Dutch to him, but he nodded sagely and, divining from Holzhacker's tone that the news was bad, assumed a worried expression.

"Naturally," continued Dr. Holzhacker smoothly, "my department was concerned to establish the cause or causes of this undesirable trend and we programmed our Public Opinion Samplers accordingly. Well, to cut a long story short and spare you the boring details, we eliminated a number of false leads and finally isolated the culprit. Imagine our surprise on discovering that it was none other than our old friend Krapp's Syndrome—in fact, what is more properly termed Minority Identification Severance!"

Over the top of his spectacles he flashed a quick look at his captive audience as if expecting some violent reaction to this bombshell. Getting none, he went on: "In specific terms, the suppression of criminality has eliminated the old distinction between the 'criminal' and 'law-abiding' classes. This seems to have induced a mild form of mass neurosis on the subconscious level. The average citizen, denied the satisfaction of being able to say, 'There, by the grace of God, goes John Smith, the bastard!' feels deprived. He has lost a focus for his self-righteousness, and the mutual complacency which forms an important bond in any large group is subtly undermined. The problem is not new of course. Where, if I may permit myself an analogy, would be the joy of Heaven without the satisfaction of Hell evaded?"

"I see," lied the Prime Minister. "Where indeed?"

"The conclusion is inescapable. The nation *needs* its criminals."

"Or," said Sir Herman Kelly, "criminal."

"Precisely," said Dr. Holzhacker. "Precisely. What we

need is a scapegoat. An Official National Criminal, if you like."

"Just one?" enquired the Prime Minister.

"Perfectly adequate. He will be chosen at random by our computers from the Electoral Roll. It will be a permanent appointment, of course."

"I am on the Electoral Roll," said the Prime Minister. "I hope you're not suggesting. . . ."

"Tut tut, P.M.," said Sir Herman. "Don't be so bloody naïve man. There will be exceptions, exemptions, important public figures and so forth. Your country needs you and all that, eh, Holzhacker?" He winked broadly.

"Between ourselves," said Dr. Holzhacker primly, refusing to be inveigled into horseplay, "we shall in practice limit our choice to, er, shall we say, our more second-class citizens. Our computers will be programmed to select someone more or less, ah. . . ."

"Useless," said Sir Herman with Northern candour.

"And this scapegoat chappie," asked the Prime Minister, "I mean, what's he going to *do*?"

The Minister of Transport rubbed his fat belly and smiled at the ceiling. "That," he said, "is my department. We are going to kill two birds with one little stone. Dr. Holzhacker is going to kill his bird. And I am going to kill mine." He paused, evidently enjoying the Prime Minister's total mystification. "There has been a lot of hot-headed talk lately about abolishing the railways. Pure sentimental nonsense. We are the only country in Europe which still has a railway system. It's one of our biggest tourist attractions. From that point of view they are a necessary expense just like Speakers Corner. And don't forget," he waved an admonitory finger, "the railways give work to over seventy-two thousand voters. With a figure like that in mind our hands are tied. Abolition is out then, right out. Now I know you're going to tell me," he hit the Prime Minister with a belligerent glare, "that last year the railways carried a grand total of one hundred and seventeen passengers representing four thousand eight hundred and seventy-six man miles. But that's all blather, pure blather."

The Prime Minister no longer made any attempt to hide his bewilderment. His aristocratic features were twitching wildly in all directions. "You mean . . ." he began.

"Exactly! Exactly!" boomed the Minister of Transport. "The answer to our prayers. 'Scapegoat' means we have found a use for the railways."

The Prime Minister shook his head groggily. His collar seemed too tight for him and he pulled at it feebly. "What time is it?" he croaked.

"It is ten twenty-three," said Dr. Holzhacker without even looking at his watch.

"I really must have some breakfast," said the Prime Minister.

* * *

FIVE: INVITATION TO THE VOYAGE.

We are agreed then that a boy leaving school may be compared to a bucket. That is, he is formed but empty.

(N.B.—perfect bucket, can it be improved on? Its perfection is dependent on the use to which it is put and so is limited).

MEMO therefore: Can perfection be limited? (e.g. Wednesday?) Is there any perfection which is not? Is Ideal Bucket perfect or merely ideal?

P.S.—Is I.B. perfect if never used?

We are further agreed that the nature, or character, of any bucket is conditioned by its contents. Identity of shape notwithstanding, there is a real and significant difference between a bucket habitually used for X and one used for Y.

MEMO: Is the word 'habitually' (above) germane or necessary to my argument? What are the effects if any of its presence or absence? Should I say, "a bucket containing . . ." etc.?

Must we not therefore concur in supposing the foregoing to be cogent arguments in favour of an Environmentalist *Weltanschauung*?

Smith leaned back in his chair and looked at what he had written. He permitted himself to relieve the monotony of his serious academic frown with what he privately thought of as The Fleeting Ghost of a Smile. He turned a little in his chair so that he could see out of the window. The sky was marked with little clouds. Cirro-cumulus.

Sometimes wrongly called nimbo-stratus by irresponsible dilettantes.

His eyes wandered back to the paper still in the typewriter. "Ideal Bucket," he murmured. "Hum! Ha!" Mentally he photographed the card on the other side of his door which now read:

14-9-67-SMITHPLATO/1

The mail slot on the desk flew open with a hiss and a large brown envelope flopped down on the IN tray like a stranded fish.

Smith's first impulse was to let Miss Rottgarten deal with the newcomer. His fingers itched towards the locked drawer. . . . He restrained himself with a sigh. Duty. He took the sheet he had written from the machine, folded it lovingly and put it in an inside pocket. He picked up the brown envelope and studied it minutely at close range. It bore his name in big letters and there were rubber-stamp impressions in different colours which said things like: "PERSONAL" — and — "HIGHLY SECRET" — and — "MOST URGENT"—and—"AFFAIR OF STATE: DO NOT OPEN".

The envelope contained a thick sheaf of documents printed on economy-thin government-pink paper. He shuffled through them rapidly, reading extracts at random. He grunted. He put the papers back in the envelope and stuffed the envelope into his pocket. Then he put a clean sheet in the typewriter:

Dear Miss Rottgarten:

I have been called away—business trip. My absence perhaps will be somewhat prolonged but I am confident you can manage things while I am gone. Try to get up to date with correspondence. I will send you a post-card!

He put the dust cover on the machine, stood up, walked to the door, put on his hat and coat and went out.

He closed the door softly behind him with his left hand.

* * *

SIX: PRAGMATIC IDEALISM.

Out he came, through the glass doors, down the steps into the square. He felt like a mountain on its way to Mahomet. A wave to the left, another to the right. The applauding multitude scurried around him unheeding. He paused at the bottom of the steps. His body sampled, savoured and approved the available sense-data—the sunshine, the warm air, the feel of the pavement underfoot, traffic noises, the shifting patterns of the crowd.

A voice spoke just behind his left ear: "What's the time then?"

"It's a quarter to seven," replied Smith without hesitation. He didn't turn round but continued to stare fixedly into the middle distance as though consulting some public time-piece inaccessible to the other.

"Omigod," the voice said and shuffled away.

Smith consulted his watch. Three eighteen. Fine. Fine. He felt a twinge of pity for his unknown interlocutor whom he imagined in a dark corner of an abandoned car park putting a pistol to his head and, with a despairing cry of "TOO LATE!" pulling the trigger.

His steps took him towards the centre of the square. Here, under a neon banner urging mindfulness of voter-duty on the passing citizenry, stood the Sampler. Smith approached it and thoughtfully considered the fluorescent screen which bore, flashing on and off at regular intervals, the Question of the Day.

SCAPEGOAT? it said, YES OR NO? . . .

SCAPEGOAT? YES OR NO? . . .

SCAPEGOAT? . . .

Smith knew what Democracy meant and took his duties as a citizen-voter seriously. A small voice in his head seemed to say: Action is Choice, Choice is Will. And, "The Pragmatic Idealist will not hesitate to make a choice when called on to do so, however little he understands of the alternatives involved." Mentally he labelled this: "Smith's first maxim (??paradox) of Idealistic Behaviour". A short paper perhaps? "The Idealist as Voter"? . . .

Half aloud he said. "Scapegoat? Scapegoat? And what the bloody hell is that now?"

He looked around him, feeling the air with his nose. "Today," he announced, "is a Positive day."

Underneath the screen there were four buttons marked respectively: YES, RESERVATIONS, NO and DON'T KNOW. He held his identity bracelet against the slot and reached his other hand towards the buttons. To the "YES" button he applied the decisive pressure of an unwavering forefinger.

He walked off, humming under his breath and smiling the satisfied smile of a bishop who has just proved conclusively that Jesus was not, after all, a Jew.

* * *

SEVEN: DOMESTIC.

"So you're off tomorrow then?" said Mrs. Smith.

Smith arrested a forkload of tinned peas half-way to his mouth. "Business," he said shortly, contriving to look both cryptic and important. The peas continued their journey.

"What time must you leave? I can make you an early breakfast."

"Nine thirty-two from Paddington. Won't be necessary. Breakfast as usual."

Mrs. Smith stared dumb and incomprehending across the table. She was a lumpish woman. Her hair was greasy and needed washing. "I don't understand," she said. "What do you mean?"

"Two poached eggs," Smith explained carefully. "Toast, orange juice, black coffee. Eight o'clock sharp."

"But . . . Paddington?"

"A railway station. Terminus." Another group of peas delivered without loss to the mastication centres. Munch. Munch. "My instructions are formal on this point." He put down his fork, produced a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket, riffled through them, marked a passage with his finger, studied it, waved the papers vaguely in the general direction of his wife, regrouped them and returned them to his pocket. "Train," he said. "Only way to travel for a gentleman. Time to think." He picked up his fork again.

"Too much bustle these days. Hurry, hurry, hurry. No time to think. Ech!"

"Well I don't know," said Mrs. Smith. She shook her head in wonder, "Paddington!"

"The Company never does anything without a reason," he assured her.

"All I can say is, well, only the other day that nice Prime Minister was saying on Television how we must all pull our fingers up if the country is going to pay its way and everything. What if everybody wanted to ride about all the time in silly old trains? There wouldn't be any work done. Life isn't a bowl of cherries after all."

Smith wasn't listening. "Eight o'clock," he said. "And no messing. No burnt toast. Have you ever considered,"—he speared a pea on his fork and held it across the table—"the colour of these things?"

Mrs. Smith looked uncertainly from the pea to her husband and back to the pea.

"Well?" he asked.

"It's the tins," she said. "They don't get any sunlight all cramped up in there."

"Cramped," he agreed. "Yesss. Lightless. Airless. The life of the tinned pea is certainly nasty." He eyed the greenish sphericule on his fork with mingled pity and disfavour. Then, assuming a deliberate and pontifical tone: "It is my belief . . . that these things are . . . dyed."

"Well I never," said his wife, formally intimating that a new and fascinating concept had swum into her ken. She promptly disappeared into the kitchen with an armful of dirty plates.

"Not only dead," said Smith to the pea. "But dyed."

"Trains is it now?" muttered the lumpish Mrs. Smith into her washing-up water. "Whatever next?"

* * *

EIGHT: FIRM AT WORK.

Unperceived by some forty million snoring voters, a new democratic day broke for rich and poor.

In the grey-fingered dawn a little knot of workmen, tired, paint-splashed and cement-dusty, weighed down the

pavement outside Paddington Station. They scuffed their great boots listlessly while some of their number loaded the last of the ladders and the last bits of scaffolding into a lorry marked "MINISTRY OF WORKS".

"Not firkin bad for a rush job," said one, rubbing his hands absently on the seat of his overalls. He indicated their handiwork with a jerk of his head.

In front of the nasty mock-Gothic façade of the station entrance there now stood a nasty mock-Doric, mock-marble triumphal arch as tall as two buses.

"He'll probably be here soon," said someone.

"It's today then?"

"Yerse. Be a big crowd I spec."

"Lot of bloody rubbish," said O'Slavery, the ganger.

"'Ere Pete, what's it all about then?"

"Firked if I know mate. Gaffer says they're putting up one of these firkers in front of every firking station in the country."

A truculent voice said: "What I want to know is what the firkin-ell is that lile lot supposed to mean? Ar?" The speaker stabbed a thumb upwards at the arch then spat on the ground in reply to his own question.

Across the architrave was an inscription in mock-gilt, mock-Roman letters:

AND HE SHALL LAY HIS HANDS ON THE HEAD OF THE
GOAT AND SHALL CONFESS OVER HIM ALL THE INIQUITIES
OF THE PEOPLE AND SHALL SEND HIM AWAY INTO THE
WILDERNESS.

AND THE GOAT SHALL BEAR VPON HIM ALL THEIR
INIQUITIES INTO A LAND NOT INHABITED.

—LEVITICVS XVI

"Why don't you ask Jim? 'E bloody wrote it."

"Ey, Jim!"

"Firked if I know mate. It's Greek to me."

"Poor bastard," said someone softly. "Poor bloody bastard."

One by one they followed their gear into the lorry and the lorry went away down the long grey street.

EIGHT (A): A LONG TIME PASSED.

A long time passed.

NINE: THE GREAT BIG TICKET.

(i)

He invariably sat in the window corner. He kept his back to the engine having once read in the *Reader's Digest* that it is better for the eyes to view a receding landscape.

In the daytime there were fields with cows. Usually five cows—three standing, two lying, turning their heads in vegetable contentment to watch the trains go by.

And at night, only blackness and, from time to time, the yellow lights of yet another dirty little town sliding past him in the foggy dark.

How many days and nights was it now? How many cows? How many identical towns in the anonymous, everlasting fog? How many miles had he sat there in his corner, alone with the clicking of the wheels? How many months of draughty waiting-rooms, dirty buffets, cold grey platforms smelling of fish? How many identically dreary station hotels had he passed through, leaving no trace of his passing?

How many? Was it a million? That seemed about right. A million somethings—miles, months, waiting-rooms. It was all the same. It was so many, so much, so long, that whatever you added to the figure made no difference. . . .

He put up a hand to clear a hole in the condensation on the window, then pressed his nose to the hole and peered out. Nothing. Only blackness painted on the other side of the glass.

(ii)

Smith was always trying to start Meaningful Conversations. He was rarely successful in this. One reason was the dearth of co-conversationalists. It wasn't just that his fellow passengers were unwilling to talk to him. It was more that there weren't any other passengers. And even when there were, they had a tendency just to stare at him

without speaking as though he were some unique exhibit in a museum of old monsters.

Of course it wasn't really surprising that his fellow-citizens should shun the railways as a means of transport. Conditions were terrible: irregular schedules, unhelpful officials, dirty trains, inexplicable stops in the middle of nowhere, fog all the time—no wonder the economy was going downhill when the travelling businessman had so many inconveniences to contend with.

He wrote letters to "The Times" setting forth his views, enumerating his complaints, and suggesting remedies. It became something of a habit with him. Sometimes he wrote as many as two a day, of these letters.

There was one thing to be said for the Great Conversation Famine; it left him all the time he needed for the paperwork which, inevitably, his job involved. Merely keeping the Order Book up to date was almost a full-time occupation, for even when there were no actual or concrete orders to record, a precise schedule of his day-to-day activities had to be kept against the day when he would be called to account for his stewardship by Head Office. Well, it was all there. They would have nothing to reproach him with. The Order Book would be in order, however few the orders it might contain.

One way and another, then, he kept moving. And time did pass, albeit slowly. By the end of the first eighteen months or so, it had all become pretty much routine.

* * *

TEN: RED LEADER.

"Nobody, it is said, was more surprised than Doctor Holzhacker. . . ."

(Watkins and Ware: op. cit.)

"Tell me, Prime Minister," said the Interviewer, "this is not the first time it has happened, is it?"

"That what has happened?" inquired the Prime Minister, blinking. He was hot. The lights hurt his eyes. He had reason to suspect his makeup was beginning to run.

"Why—that a government White Paper has made the best-seller lists."

"How on earth should I know?" said the Prime Minister tetchily. "I'm not a ruddy encyclopaedia, am I? Why don't you ask one of those journalist chappies? They always seem to know everything. Before I do myself as often as not."

"Thank you. Ah, yes. But. Well. And how do you account for this phenomenon?"

"They're always sticking their noses in where they don't belong, that's why. If I had my way. . . ."

"Now—how do you account for the tremendous, ah, interest aroused by the Scapegoat Report?"

"Oh that. Well, it's not really my business to account for it, is it? I mean I have a large staff, and then there's always the Cabinet and so forth. What was it Gladstone said . . .?"

"God in heaven!" said Sir Herman Kelly, leaning over and switching off the set. "A right bloody mess we're in now, Holzhacker."

Dr. Holzhacker made a Gothic cathedral of his long white fingers and considered. "It is playing hell with the Mental Stability Index," he admitted, in his best colloquial English. "Very unscientific."

"Whose idea was it anyway, to print those letters?"

Dr. Holzhacker shrugged. "It seemed like a relevant idea at the time. 'The Times' refused to print them. We included them as an appendix to the report. This,"—he waved a hand around his head—"was unforeseeable."

"Dammit man, it's your job to foresee things."

"My dear Kelly, you forget that Statistical Planning is subject like everything else to the laws of probability. And when you are dealing with probabilities the improbable is always possible."

Sir Herman looked at his colleague for a moment with something like awe. "Holzhacker," he said eventually, "I see that even you have a streak of poetry in you."

"Science," replied Dr. Holzhacker urbanely, "has no need of a Mona Lisa: it has the laws of Thermodynamics."

Sir Herman dialled a waiter and ordered two more large whiskies. There was silence for a time in the comfortable lounge, broken only by the synthetic crackle of the fire.

"I wonder," said Sir Herman, speaking very quietly, "I wonder if he knows."

"Smith?"

"Aye. Smith."

"I think I can set your mind at rest on that point, Sir Herman. Our security precautions are pretty stringent you know."

There was another long silence.

* * *

ELEVEN: THE PORTER WHO HURRIED SLOWLY.

It was a winter's morning. The sun shone, but feebly. Behind the door marked:

R. BRADBURY. STATION-MASTER.

sat R. Bradbury, Station-Master, at his desk, reading a letter. He was a dried-up little man, like an old loafah. As he read, a wild gleam lit his bloodshot eye. With the letter in his hand he ran to the door, wrenched it open, and stuck his head out on to the platform.

"Horowitz!" he shrieked in a voice like a cracked bell.

At the other end of Number One platform, 6-8-58-Horowitz/13, Porter, was engaged in dulcet colloquy with his West Indian colleague Mr. C. S. "Sepia" Snow. Their theme was the relative merits of Tarzan and Batman as type-figures of mid-twentieth century urban culture.

Horowitz and Snow made up fifty percent of the station's personnel.

Three or four seconds after hearing his name called Horowitz started, let fall the broom on which he was leaning, and glanced both up and down the grimy platform. His eyes behind their thick glasses assumed a troubled expression.

"That's me," he said. "I must dash."

"That's all right man," said Mr. Snow, generously. "You just go right ahead."

"I must fly," said Horowitz, as if to reinforce his earlier explanation.

Mr. Snow gave him leave with an eloquent gesture of the right hand. There was a longish pause during which Mr. Snow looked at Mr. Horowitz and Mr. Horowitz looked up to heaven. Finally Horowitz turned and darted away up Number One platform with the speed of a Zombie on work-to-rule.

"Snoooow," came the Station-Master's voice, dimly.

"Well now," said Mr. Snow to himself, genuinely amazed. "Both of us. Isn't that something?"

"Coming!" he shouted, and started up the platform.

The Station-Master met the panting pair at the door of his office. He marshalled them in front of his desk and shook the letter under their noses. "You know what this is?" he asked truculently.

Snow shook his head. Horowitz considered the question.

"This is It! This is what we've been waiting for. He's coming! He'll be here in a couple of hours."

"Who's coming?" asked Snow.

"No," admitted Horowitz finally.

"The Scapegoat. The Criminal. He's coming here."

"Who is?" asked Horowitz.

"It's the Man, man," Snow said, catching the spirit of the occasion.

"Now," said the Station-Master. He rummaged in a drawer and produced a large sheet of paper marked "STANDING ORDERS". "You know what to do, we've been through it often enough." He ran his eye over the paper. "Snow, are the fog dispensers ready?"

"Ready and waiting."

"Start 'em up then. Horowitz, get a can of that fish smell and slop it around on Number One platform. Then get down to the buffit and warn Mrs. Rose. He may try to get a cup of tea."

"Ah," said Horowitz. "The Man."

"Precisely. And one more thing—both of you, if he asks for any information. . . . Eh?"

He looked meaningfully at Snow who closed one yellow eye in a broad wink and touched a finger to his nose.

"Right," said the Station Master. "Jump to it then."

Horowitz gave him a long hard look from behind his

glasses and said in a brisk fashion: "Well, can't stand round here all day talking. Got work to do."

He began to inch his way towards the door. Snow was already long gone.

As he sped down the platform, Horowitz heard the high, low-powered whine of the fog-dispensers warming up.

* * *

TWELVE: REMEMBER THE ALAMO?

"Hurry down sunshine, hurry down rain,
Ol' Caseys gonna ride the road again;
Swift as lightnin', smooth as glass;
Better take yo' hat off when the Train go past."
(from: *The Ballad of Casey Jones*)

Up to a point, everything went according to plan. The train drew up at the little station, spat out one passenger, paused to get its breath back and clanked off into nowhere in obedience to some obscure and futile curriculum.

That left Smith standing alone at a point almost precisely midway between the two ends of the murky platform. In one hand he held a cheap cardboard suitcase of the type normally associated with migratory Italians; in the other a very battered leather briefcase which only an ingenious arrangement of strings and bits of wire preserved from instant dissolution. He wore a wide-brimmed black travelling hat and a bulky leather trenchcoat of a colour that hesitated between brown and orange.

He peered this way and that in the gloom. He put down his cases and looked at his watch. Although it was still early afternoon, the station seemed immersed in a sort of premature twilight—an impression which the omnipresent fog did nothing to dispel. He shivered and turned up the collar of his coat.

Aloud he said: "Here we go again." And privately he added: "Where?"

A species of clanking and rattling caught his attention. Coming towards him along the platform was a figure

pushing a trolley. A porter evidently. He moved with almost incredible slowness, bent double, head thrust forward as though battling some invisible slipstream.

Recognising, as he thought, a possible informant, Smith picked up his bags and moved to intercept.

"What time is the train for Bletchley?"

The porter didn't falter for an instant but continued to advance with the inevitability of a small, tired Juggernaut.

"Bletchley," said Smith again.

"I'm afraid I can't say," muttered Horowitz, not looking up.

"Well, which platform then?"

"Bletchley?"

"Yes."

"Never heard of it."

"Who can I ask then?"

"You'll have to ask someone else," said Horowitz, still coming on. "I'm in a hurry." He was level with Smith now and beginning to edge past him, staring straight ahead through headlamp spectacles like a worried mariner on the *qui vive* for icebergs.

Smith made a last attempt. "Isn't there a time-table or anything?"

Horowitz muttered a parting shot between clenched teeth. "There are time-tables, aren't there? Don't bother me. I've got work to do."

Smith stood for a long minute watching the porter's back recede from him with infinite slowness as in some horrible nightmare. Like a good general he recognised a total defeat when he saw one and made no further, futile attempt to re-open the debate. He was an old hand by now at this type of conversation and had learnt to cultivate a degree of Oriental fatalism which was of value in situations such as currently confronted him.

His best move now was towards the dimly lighted sign marked "BUFFET" and Smith made it. As often happens in chess, in military affairs, and in the affairs of men generally, one's choice of direction tends to be limited to Forwards or Backwards. This much we have in common with rats in mazes. However, it should be noted that not every step forward is necessarily an advance and no doubt Clausewitz has said as much somewhere.

The buffet was empty. It was a huge, ill-lit, high-ceilinged cavern of a place with a wooden floor and peeling green-painted walls enriched with fancy plasterwork in the 1920s neo-Egyptian-structuralist idiom. A series of dusty posters exhorted the directionless traveller to "COME TO SUNNY ILLEGIBLE". Others bore such heart-warming slogans as: "TRAVEL IN STYLE/WITH BRITISH RAIL" and "NO DOGS ALLOWED". At the far end of the room a wooden counter ran from wall to wall. Behind this was a mirror of equal length with several bullet holes in it. In the centre of the room stood a huge iron stove from which a much-angled pipe made its way deviously towards the ceiling. The place as a whole had the look of a waiting-room on the Trans-Siberian Railway in the worst days of 1917.

At one end of the counter was a glass display case which contained a modest selection of curly-sided sandwiches and a disgruntled-looking pork pie in a cellophane wrapper. Smith inspected the dainties morosely. On the inside of the case a Kamikaze fly, lone survivor of a numerous squadron, was beating his brains out on the glass.

Smith chose the pie as the lesser evil and was in the act of transferring it to a small, cracked plate marked "ADELPHI TEAROOMS" when Mrs. Rose, choosing her moment with fiendish psychological insight, emerged from her foxhole behind the counter.

"TEAORCOFFEE?" she yelled in a voice like a tin-opener.

Smith dropped the pie and fumbled on the floor to retrieve it. Straightening to confront his assailant, he found her to be a smallish, fattish, fiftyish lady with decayed, dissolving, be-warted features topped by a terrifying mop of reddish, wiry hair. For a second and no real reason Smith was reminded of his wife and a small pang went through him. He glared at her fiercely.

"Coffee," he said shortly. "Black."

"We only got tea," she said.

"Tea then."

At the other end of the counter stood a tea-urn of miraculous complexity. She sprang towards it and began with imbecile self-assurance to manipulate a complex series of wheels and levers. Steam hissed out from a multi-

tude of vents, valves and cracks and a threatening rumble came from deep in the guts of the machine.

At about the same time, the noise in the street outside the station first began to make itself heard.

Mrs. Rose thrust a cupful of greyish liquid across the counter, taking care as she did so to slop a proportion of it into the saucer.

"Shillin'," she said. She eyed Smith's pie suspiciously. "What you got there then?"

"I don't know," said Smith. "But I mean to find out."

"It's a pork pie," she told him. "Shillin' the tea, two and four the pie. Three and four."

Smith handed over the money. "Capitalist," he said.

"None of your dirty language in here," returned Mrs. Rose unperturbed, pocketing the money. She sank back like the Lady of The Lake to her Dickensian hiding-place under or behind the counter where, doubtless, she proceeded to engage in some lawful, healthy and profitable occupation.

The noise in the street got louder.

Smith sat down by a window thinking there would be more light there only there wasn't. Although the window he had chosen looked out, not onto the platform, but onto the street outside and the station yard, and although the light in the street was of normal daytime intensity as opposed to the light obtaining in the station itself which was—as we have previously remarked—gloomy and dim, yet for reasons themselves obscure the daylight of the street seemed unable to make any headway against the murk of the station. It was as though the station were surrounded by some invisible barrier. The feeble rays of the afternoon sun, falling against the window of the station buffet, stopped, apparently quite unable to penetrate the glass.

Smith gave only passing consideration to this phenomenon, attributing it to the balcful effects of a prevailing northerly wind. He paid no attention at all to what was taking place in the street.

He cleared a place on the table among the cigarette-ash, sugar, tea-puddles, chewed-up drinking-straws, bits of sandwich wrapper and other debris artfully arranged there by the unspeakable Mrs. Rose. Then he took out the Order

Book and rifled quickly but methodically through its *demi-vierge* pages, making sure that it was up to date. Satisfied, he returned it to his briefcase and proceeded to dash off a quick letter to "The Times" complaining about the state of the table-top. He did not scruple to lay the blame full on the sagging shoulders of Mrs. Rose, not knowing that in this, as in all that related to the running of the buffet, Mrs. Rose was no more than the helpless agent of Standing Orders.

He drank his tea. Then he unpeeled the cellophane from the pie. He bisected the pie with a knife provided by the management and scrutinised the interior. The omens were bad. His struggle with this aborted artifact was brief and the pie won. Smith pushed it, untasted, to the farthest corner of the table.

This left him free to concentrate on the problem of Mrs. Rose. He whipped a pencil and notebook from an inner pocket and jotted down a preliminary formulation, thus:

WHAT IN THE NAME OF GOD

IS THE OLD BAG DOING UNDER THERE?

Reduced to the more conventional symbols of algebraic logic it looked something like this:

N?

It was a fascinating and complex problem as it had both an epistemological and an ethical angle. Properly handled it might take days to solve and soon Smith was absorbed in a fury of calculation, postulation, counter-postulation, hypothecation and inference.

Somewhat to his chagrin he found himself, about five minutes later, confronted by the Answer as represented by the expression:

P.

Which translated out roughly as: "Try cutting the Gordian knot of metaphysical speculation with the sword of point-blank interrogation."

"I say," he called. "What are you doing 'under there?'"

No answer.

"Are you by any chance . . . knitting?"

It was no more than an inspired guess and its validity was destined to remain forever untested; just at that moment the clamour outside came suddenly to a peak and

Mrs. Rose's answer, if any, was suffocated in the hulla-baloo.

Smith looked out of the window with a mixture of annoyance and curiosity, giving events outside for the first time the full benefit of his attention.

The window commanded a view of the approaches to the station. Three streets debouched into the station yard and all three were jam-packed as far as the eye could see with shouting human beings. Stretching across the yard between the crowd and the ticket-hall was a line, three deep, of latter-day Horatiuses in the green plastic trench-coats of the dreaded BSS/SOS(OSSS). (*)

Many of the crowd bore baners on which were inscribed a wide variety of pugnacious maxims. Smith, never averse to a maxim, studied these with professional interest. "END THIS INHUMANITY!"—"WIBSEY YOUNG CONSERVATIVES SAY FREE SCAPEGOAT NOW!" "CRIMINAL FOR POPE!"—"YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR TRAINS!"—and—"INSTANT DEMONSTRATIONS/RING PRI 0854"—were among those which struck him particularly by their aptness and pith.

In the seething middle of the crowd, half obscured in the forest of waving banners, agitated fists and tossing hats, a television camera crew, perched on top of a wildly swaying lorry, clung desperately to life.

Even as Smith watched, the Brownian movements of the crowd took on order and direction and the babel of individual slogans organised itself into a single, sullen, deep-chested roar:

WE WANT SMITH!

WE WANT SMITH!

WE WANT SMITH!

The millipede mob, chanting its chorus, began to advance against the station in an avalanche of fists and shouting faces. They moved slowly at first, then, gathering impetus, they crashed into and over the puny green-coated line which tried for a hopeless second to bar their way, and swept down on the ticket-hall with the mindless fury of the *poilus de quatorze* at the Battle of the Marne.

* Bureau of Social Statistics/Special Operations Section (Opinion Sampling Security and Surveillance).

Smith, watching from his window, suddenly felt his overcoat of detachment drop from him as the true significance of the tumult hit him between the eyes like the hammer-blows of Nirvana. Suddenly he boiled with tremendous elation. Suddenly he knew. THIS was what he had waited for, longed for, striven for, all those weary months. At last! At last!

He glanced at his watch. Then he whirled from the window and threw himself against the counter, leaning over it as far as he could. "The Passengers!" he shouted into the gloomy recesses on the other side. "The Passengers! They've come! Now you are going to pay for your crimes."

He didn't wait for an answer but was out of the door and running along the platform.

At the ticket-barrier the Station Staff rallied for a last ditch stand. Wielding brooms and with fierce cries of "'Ere!" Bradbury and Snow opposed the tide for a few glorious seconds before, dutiful to the last, they went down beneath the feet of the crowd. The metal barrier groaned, bulged and crashed before the awful weight of infuriated humanity on the other side. Horowitz, lamentably mistiming his arrival, threw himself into the breach, struggled for a moment and was engulfed. The mob, shouting their war-cry and still clutching the rags of their banners, flowed onto the platform like a mighty tide.

Flowed, eddied, and were still.

An awful silence descended on the crowd, more terrible for the cacophony which had gone before. In the silence another sound was heard—the sound of a train departing from Platform Two.

A small figure was leaning from one of the windows, gesticulating wildly. His receding face bore an expression of hurt surprise. His mouth opened, but his words were lost in the sound of the engine as the train gathered speed and the Scapegoat was carried off in the direction of Bletchley.

— ROGER JONES

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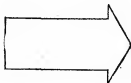
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